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QUICKLY PRESSING HIS SHOULDER AGAINST A HUGE BOWLDER, WITH ONE MIGHTY EFFORT HE SENT IT TOPPLING DOWN UPON THE MASKED MEN BELOW.

OR,

The Hidden Cabin of Wind Canyon.

A Romance of Northwest Wyoming.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "HUSTLER HARRY, THE COWBOY
SPORT," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FORTUNE-SEEKERS.

At the close of a sultry summer day a wagon-train of emigrants, bound for the Black Hills, went into camp on a small tributary to the South Fork of the Cheyenne River in Eastern Wyoming. There were nine of the white-topped wagons and nearly thirty of the emigrants, who were on their way to the gold fields of which wondrous tales were being told. They were from a dozen different states and territories, one being a native of Vermont and several hailing from California, the "Golden State" of by-gone days.

Among the last mentioned were two veterans of the "palmy days" of '49 and '50, who had seen much of rough life among the mountains

and in the mines. The '49er was a peculiar little sunburned, wrinkled old fellow who possessed a cracked voice and spoke in a quick, nervous manner. Among the people of the train he was known as "Old Hasty," a name which seemed very appropriate. Although he was not given to a great display of weapons, it was said that he was "well heeled," and could shoot with a swiftness that proclaimed him a bad man to fool with.

Whether "Bijah Bigfist" was the true name of the other old Californian or not is a matter of uncertainty, yet, certain it is that the name seemed decidedly appropriate, for he was the possessor of an enormous hand. But 'Bijah's hand was scarcely too large for the rest of his body. The man was a giant in stature and strength, and was good-natured according to his size. Like Old Hasty, he did not carry many weapons, but, unlike the '49er, he could not produce a revolver at the first sign of "squalls." He was also a remarkably poor shot with any kind of a rifle or revolver, and he made no secret of the humiliating fact. And yet, for all of 'Bijah's usual good-nature, it was not thought "healthy" by those who knew him best to arouse him to anger. His wrath was something fearful to encounter.

These two old Californians had joined the train together and were pards after a fashion, although in the telling of big stories they were rivals, for when one had related some wonderful and impossible yarn, the other would make a desperate attempt to tell something that would cast his companion's story in the shade. Thus the two old miners provided sport for the entire train.

The smoke of a number of camp-fires was rising lazily through the branches of the cottonwoods amid which the train had halted, and the aroma of cooking coffee which greeted the nostrils of the weary emigrants told that the evening meal was in preparation. The sight of a woman busying herself by one of these fires told how much those of the weaker sex will dare that they may be with their husbands and children—for there were also children with the train. Four women were going into the Hills with the company, three of whom were accompanying their husbands.

The fourth was a young girl of eighteen or nineteen, who was the especial admiration and pride of the entire train. She was the only companion of her father, a strangely silent, sad-appearing man, who had been found to be rather uncommunicative by his fellow-travelers. Martin Holmes was not a man to win many intimate friends, although he might—and did—command the respect of those who knew him. He seemed like a person who had met with a great affliction, that he could not entirely forget even for a short space of time.

Hattie Holmes was a sunny-haired, blue-eyed little fairy, who had a smile and a kind word for every one. The men called her the "Queen of the Train," and nearly all of them showed her as much respect as they would have displayed toward a queen in truth. The women were also her friends, and the children delighted in her company. It is an undeniable fact that more than one of the men with the outfit were desperately in love with the pretty girl, but the most of them had sense enough to keep the secret locked well within their hearts. 'Bijah Bigfist, however, could not refrain from telling his California comrade how he was affected by Hattie's witching eyes.

"Gol dang it!" he drawled, "I dunno w'ats ther trouble with my ole innards, but there's ther blamedest commoshun roun' my hash-basket every time that thar leetle piece o' heaven's glory turns them thar two vierlet eyes onter me. W'y, you leetle dried-up ole runt, I jest want ter git rite down an' worshup ther—"

"Thar! thar!" grunted Old Hasty, in supreme disgust, "don't tole me no more. You make me so tired! W'y, you overgrown lum-mux! ye'r love-sick!"

"Dunno but ye'r right!" admitted 'Bijah, sheepishly. "Anyhow, it's suthin', ther like o' which I never grappled with afore. Don't reckon ye know of ary thing as 'll cure it afore it gits dangerous, do ye, ole man?"

"Yep."

"W'at?"

"A good big dose o' common-sense," was Old Hasty's grim reply. "I've tussled with ther same blamed eppydemic."

At this 'Bijah gave a grunt and subsided into silence.

The guide of the train was a rather handsome, dark-bearded, sun-burned man, apparently about forty years of age. He gave his name as Nebraska Nat, and not one of the train people knew him by any other title. Like 'Bijah Bigfist, the guide was smitten by Hattie's sweet face and lovable ways, but unlike the big Californian, he did not hesitate to let the object of his adoration know his feelings.

But Hattie treated the two men exactly alike. She smiled on one as sweetly and as often as she did the other, thus distributing her attentions without favor.

This did not satisfy Nebraska Nat. The guide was the possessor of a liberal amount of self-esteem, and he fancied that, if he did his level

best, it would not be a very difficult thing to win more than a passing word or smile from the pride of the train. With this belief came a determination to win the girl's love if it lay in his power.

It did not take Hattie long to discover what Nat's redoubled attentions meant, but she did not change her demeanor toward him in the least; she neither gave him encouragement nor rebuff. This manner of treatment nettled the would-be wooer, and he resolved to press his attentions still more closely.

Among the trainmen was one who appeared to keep his eyes on both Hattie and the guide in a way which seemed to proclaim him a jealous admirer of the pretty girl. This individual was a genuine "Down-Easter," straight from the State of Vermont—so he said—and as green as the verdant hills of his native State, if appearances could be relied upon. He was a long, lank individual, with a solemn, sad-looking face, and no one was surprised when he said he had been a minister of the Gospel in his native State. He gave his name as Phineas Perkins, but he soon became known by the emigrants as "The Parson." He said he was going into the Hills to preach "the Word."

"Reckon ther Parson's plum stuck onter Leetle Blue Eyes," observed Bigfist to Old Hasty, one day.

The little gold-seeker grunted shortly.

"I don't blame him a gol-durned bit," added 'Bijah. "Ef you wasn't sech er cross-grained, dried-up leetle runt, out er whose buzzum ther milk o' human kindness is complootly dried up an' evaporated, you'd be in love with her yerself—I know ye w'd!"

"An' I calkerlate it 'u'd do me as much good as it'll do you an' ther Parson," said the '49er, grimly. "Ther Parson's watchin' ther gal an' ther guide all ther time with his two eyes as green as they kin be. Ef he finds enny fun in thet let 'im watch."

Thus matters stood at the opening of this story. The emigrants were in good spirits, for the trip thus far had been a very pleasant one and they had seen no signs of hostile red-skins, of whose depredations they had heard the most blood-chilling stories ere starting for the Hills. Another day's journey would carry them into the Hills, and, although the danger of a visit from the reds was not yet past, it seemingly had diminished. Appearances are often deceptive.

A little knot of men had gathered around Nebraska Nat, the guide, and were discussing the situation.

"Do you think there is any great danger of an attack from the reds after we get into the Hills, Nat?" asked Martin Holmes.

"I do not think so," was the reassuring answer. "Two-thirds of the stories about Indian massacres are hoaxes, gotten up to keep emigrants from coming into the Hills."

"Ef it wasn't fer the wimmin, we'd care a durned leetle bit fer ther dirty-skinned varmints," observed Old Hasty. "Ef they kem whoopin' roun' fer our skulps, we'd interjuce 'em ter a leetle s'prise party."

"Oh, hear ther b-a-a-d man from 'Way Back!" drawled 'Bijah Bigfist, with a broad grin. "Ef ther reds sh'u'd drap onter us, all we'd hev ter do'd be ter git ahint ther waggins an' let Ole Quickness go out an' lick ther stuffin' outter ther crowd o' 'em."

This sally created a slight laugh, in which Old Hasty joined good-humoredly. If any one but 'Bijah had made such talk, the '49er would have instantly waxed wroth. But, the big Californian could say almost anything to his comrade from "The Slope," and the fiery old fellow would not resent it further than to occasionally make a sharp retort.

"Dew you reely think there is the least danger from the red Philistines?" asked Parson Perkins, who, unlike the others, strange to say, had been growing more and more alarmed as they approached the Hills. "I dew hope the good Lord will keep us in the holler ov His hand—I reely dew!"

"Ef ther reds drap onter us, Parson, you must grab a shootin'-iron o' sum kind an' pestle it to 'em," said 'Bijah, winking at those who stood around. "The Lord's hand won't help ye much, here."

The Parson clasped his hands and rolled his eyes upward in horror.

"Heaven presarve me!" he groaned. "I can never take human life!"

"Then thar's only one other way fer ye ter save yer life ef ther smoky-skins drap on us," declared 'Bijah, gravely.

"Oh, my very dear friend—dear to me, unsaved though you are—how is that?"

"Waal," drawled the big miner, "you must go out an' convert ther hull gang."

"Reely!"

That was all the Parson said, but he seemed to go into a deep study.

At this moment Hattie Holmes came along, and gave the men a little nod and a smile as she passed. Nebraska Nat did not hesitate to join her and walk along by her side.

"Allow me to accompany you, Miss Holmes," he said, smiling. "You know we are in Indian land, and therefore it is well to have a body-guard."

She gave him a smile.

"But you do not think there is any particular danger, do you, Nat?" she asked.

He laughed queerly.

"Not to the train," he replied. "But if any stray red should see you walking alone, he might take a notion to carry you away to his wigwam, like some robber knight of old."

"That sounds romantic, but I do not think I should fancy it," smiled the girl, casting a wondering glance up into Nat's face.

The guide was an enigma to her. He was a handsome, graceful man, with the speech and manner of a gentleman, yet he was attired in buckskin garments, acting as guide for an emigrant train bound for the Black Hills. He had often astonished her by repeating passages from some of the great poets, thus making it apparent that he was well-read in that line, at least. With difficulty Hattie repressed her desire to inquire concerning his life, and thus far, he had revealed nothing that satisfied her curiosity.

"One could scarcely blame the Indian," murmured the guide, with his dark eyes fastened on her face.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, quickly, and instantly regretted the question when she saw to what it might lead.

"How can I make my meaning plainer?" he breathed.

"Don't try!" she exclaimed, with a nervous laugh.

But Nebraska Nat's blood was leaping in his veins, and he was not to be baffled then.

"But I wish you to understand my meaning," he said, firmly. "I have tortured myself long enough in keeping silent; now I must speak! The Indian could not be blamed for wishing to secure so fair a prize—a prize fit to grace the palace of a king!"

She put out her hand to him in appeal, a look of mingled reproach and amusement on her face.

"Don't try to flatter me!" she entreated. "If there is anything that I dislike, it is a flatterer!"

"I never was further from flattery in my life," he asserted. "I am in sober, solemn earnest. Hattie, forgive me, but I—"

"Let's go back!" and she wheeled shortly.

His hand fell on her arm.

"In a minute, Hattie—one minute is all I ask! Do not refuse me that."

Her eyes met his squarely.

"I know what you would say," she asserted, "and I beg you not to. It is useless."

But still he would not be shaken from his purpose.

"Only a coward shrinks from knowing his fate!" he declared, as he tossed back his head. "I hope I am not a coward, Hattie. What I would say must be said."

His hand closed more firmly on her arm, and his face came closer to hers—his dark, handsome face. She felt his breath touch her cheek, and she shrunk away as if it had scorched her.

"Hattie, I love you!" he whispered—"love you more than life! I would die for you if it were necessary—I would do anything for you!"

"Mr. Nat, I must go back to the camp. Please release my arm."

"One moment more!" he entreated, with an earnestness that was almost fierce. "You know nothing of my life—whether I am prince or beggar. I am neither, yet, strange as it may seem to you, I have wealth—enough that the interest will support me royally."

For an instant her wonder overcame her.

"You!" she exclaimed—"you—impossible!"

"Not at all. My present position is simply a freak, indulged in that life may be at all endurable. Without a true woman's love, some men are like rudderless crafts—they drift where the wind carries them. It is thus with me. Till I met you, I knew not what it was to be in love. I have drifted the wide world over, looking for something—I knew not what. When I saw you, I knew what it was I lacked. I can place wealth, position, love, at your feet. I beg you not to spurn what I offer."

"If you must have an answer, I will give the only one I can," faltered Hattie tremblingly. "I do not love you."

Although he must have known what was coming, he shrunk away as if she had struck him. She saw the movement, and a look of pain swept over her sweet face—a face usually wreathed in smiles, but grave enough now.

"Remember," she said, softly, "you forced me to give you an answer, and therefore have only yourself to blame."

"But perhaps you may—may learn to love me," muttered Nat, falteringly. "Think of my wealth—"

"Do you think I would sell myself for money?"

He drew back before those flashing eyes.

"No! Not that—"

Again she interrupted him. Whirling swiftly, she said:

"Let's go back."

"No," he uttered, hoarsely, "I cannot go now. I will stop here for a time."

She held out her hand.

"Nat," came faintly from her lips, "I hope you are still my friend?"

He caught her fingers and pressed them to his hot lips, but he did not trust his voice. A moment later, Hattie was walking back toward the encampment.

Nebraska Nat stood and watched her retreating form.

"She does not love me," he muttered. "She said so. But she shall be mine—I swear to have her for my wife! I'd go through the fires below to obtain her!"

CHAPTER II.

TRAILING THE KIDNAPPERS.

HATTIE HOLMES slept in a wagon by herself, having the entire vehicle for a sleeping-apartment, or "boudoir," as she laughingly called it. The pride of the train was a queer girl in more ways than one, as those who were best acquainted with her well knew. She was brave even to rashness, and when she told her father, ere the train started on its trip across the plains, that she desired a wagon for "all her own," he at once made arrangements to have her desire gratified. No girl that was not a trifle odd would have thought of such a thing, much more had the courage to carry into execution so bold a scheme. But Hattie was not a common girl.

Martin Holmes did not sleep far from his daughter's side, however. Every night the wagon in which he slumbered was drawn close to Hattie's "boudoir," and both father and daughter felt better for knowing that they were within speaking distance of each other.

Hattie was usually a very early riser, almost always being astir with the first to move. But on the morning after her talk with Nebraska Nat, given in the preceding chapter, Hattie did not appear at the usual time. Her father thought that she was sleeping a little later than common, and he made no attempt to call her till it was quite necessary that she should arise at once. But Hattie did not respond to his call.

After a time Holmes looked into the wagon. It was empty!

"Great heavens!" cried the startled man.

A second look showed him that the girl's bed had been slept in, but was tumbled in a manner which seemed to indicate that she had left it hastily. A breath of relief passed the startled parent's lips.

"She got up ahead of time this morning," he said aloud. "She must be around somewhere. It is strange that I have not seen her. By gracious! that empty wagon gave me a terrible start."

Then he began to search for her, and inquire if any one had seen her that morning. But, not one of the emigrants seemed able to give him any information concerning her. Martin Holmes began to grow puzzled and alarmed.

"Where can she be?" he vainly asked himself. "What odd freak can she have gotten into her head now? Possibly she has gone for a walk by herself, though such an act would be very foolish and rash."

It was not long before the entire train knew that Hattie was missing, and a universal search began. As soon as the alarming news reached Nebraska Nat's ears, he at once sought out Mr. Holmes, and made inquiries concerning its truth.

"Strange!" muttered Nat, when he had heard the father's story. "I have not seen her this morning, and I was astir as soon as any one. This looks bad."

Holmes turned white, and began to tremble. "Why, Nat," he faltered, "you—you do not think—"

"I cannot tell what I think just now," cut in the guide. "I must see where she slept last night."

With a word of permission from Holmes, Nat strode straight to Hattie's wagon. He hesitated ere throwing back the end flap, as if he feared he might find her within. He even called her name faintly. There was no answer. With a look of dread on his face, the guide threw back the canvas and sprung up into the wagon. Fearing the worst, Martin Holmes stood at the opening.

Half of the emigrants at once gathered around the wagon, and a hush of expectant dread prevailed.

Less than a minute passed before Nebraska Nat reappeared at the opening, holding something white in his hand. The guide's face was very pale, and he looked like a man who had made a startling discovery.

"Where is Parson Perkins?" he demanded.

No one answered.

"Two or three of you go at once and see if he can be found," commanded Nat.

Several hastened to obey while the others crowded toward the guide and commenced to overwhelm him with questions, none of which he answered then, however.

"Wait," was all he would say.

In a few moments tidings came that the Parson was not to be found and no one had seen him that morning.

"Just as I feared," said Nat, slowly, as he shook out the white piece of cloth which he held in his hand. "Here is a handkerchief—can any one tell whose?"

'Bijah Bigfist took the handkerchief and looked at it closely.

"That's ther Parson's nosewipe," he asserted. "I've seen it sev'ryal times in his possession. 'Sides thet, hyer's his 'nyshials onter ther corner."

"You can't read, can ye?" grunted Old Hasty. "Friends," cried Nebraska Nat, "the Parson's gone, Miss Holmes is gone—I found this handkerchief in the girl's wagon. Can you understand what has happened?"

There was a moment of silence, then Martin Holmes strode forward, his hands clinched and his face white with passion.

"What do you mean to insinuate?" he demanded, hoarsely.

Nat laid his hand lightly on the excited man's shoulder.

"I mean to insinuate nothing, Holmes," said the guide, a light of pity in his eyes. "For heaven's sake, do not think that I would have a base thought of her! There has been foul work done!"

The shaken father's strength came near deserting him at that instant, but, Nat's strong arm supported him and the guide's quickly spoken words gave him strength.

"Brace up, Martin"—calling him that for the first time. "There is work ahead. If Hattie is rescued, we must not waste any time. While we are faltering here the cowardly kidnapper is carrying her further and further away. We must get upon his trail as soon as possible."

With an effort, the stricken parent overcame the weakness which had rushed upon him.

"For God's sake, don't lose a moment's time, Nat!" he entreated. "It almost drives me crazy to think of my dear girl in that villain's power."

With a few well chosen words the guide assured Holmes that pursuit should be inaugurated at once; then he whirled swiftly upon the big Californian.

"Bigfist," he said, sharply, "see that six good horses are made ready for the six men whom I shall choose to accompany me. Select the best horses, without regard to ownership. I do not think there is a man with the train who will kick when he knows for what purpose the animals are to be used."

"Ef thar is, we'll shoot ther durned skunk!" snorted 'Bijah.

"An' ef ye don't count me in with them thar six men, thar'll be er holy ruction roun' this camp," declared Old Hasty, nodding his head briskly.

"We couldn't do without you," acknowledged the guide.

Fifteen minutes later six men were ready to follow the guide, and a dozen more had begged to accompany them.

"It would not do," Nat declared. "You must keep with the train, for there is no telling what may happen. A party of roving reds may come upon the camp, and you will be needed to help defend the women."

Out of the cottonwoods dashed the little band of trailers, Nebraska Nat leading.

"We will make a half-circle on this side of the creek," said Nat. "I fancy the cowardly kidnapper struck straight for the Hills; if so, we will hit his trail on this side."

"I allus had an ijee thet ther durned Parson wasn't jest w'at he seemed ter be," observed Bigfist, as they galloped out upon the open prairie. "He allus had a kind o' sneakin' way."

Old Hasty gave vent to a snort of disgust. "Oh, Lord!" he grunted. "Hear thet. Thet thar overgrown galoot's power o' precepshun is suthin' mirracylus!"

With little difficulty the trail of the kidnapper was found, heading as the guide anticipated toward the distant Hills, which were almost a day's journey away. A hard look came over Nat's face.

"In those hills it will not be an easy thing to follow a trail," he said in a low tone to the man who was nearest him.

If the words were not intended for Martin Holmes's ears, he heard them just the same, and a look of despair settled on his face.

"W'at sticks me's how ther critter lugged ther gal without makin' no racket," said Old Hasty, with a puzzled air.

"Ef ye'd ketched er whiff o' thet nosewipe 'twu'dn't stick ye very bad," was 'Bijah's assertion. "It was perfomed with chloryform, er I'm er fool."

"You are right," assured the guide. "I noticed the smell. The miserable wretch crept upon her when she was asleep and held the chloroformed handkerchief over her nostrils till she was powerless to utter an outcry."

An involuntary groan burst from Martin Holmes's lips, wrung by thoughts of what his idolized daughter had been forced to endure.

"I've bin thinkin'," said Bigfist, "thet thet durned Parson wasn't ser mighty new inter this kentry ez he might 'a' bin. Bet he hain't seen Vermont fer er right smart bit."

"Hev ye jest got thet through yer noddle?" asked Old Hasty, in disgust. "W'y, we're all satisfied thet ther durned Gospel-slinger hed bin inter ther Hills afore, an' ez fer me, I've got an ijee."

"Then fer heaving's sake, hang ter it!" grin-

ned the huge Californian. "'Tain't every day as ye gits holt o' er real ginoowine ijee 't'bout sumbuddy's 'sistance."

"I've got an ijee," repeated the '49er, calmly ignoring 'Bijah's interruption. "I believed thet durned Parson's er critter w'at most probly you've all heerd on."

The old man's words created considerable curiosity, and Nebraska Nat asked:

"Who do you think this pretended Parson is?"

"S'pose you've all heerd o' ther Black Hills outlaws as are known as ther Hawks, an' their leader calls hisself Cap'n Hawk?"

Several of the emigrants admitted that they had heard of the marauders of the Gold Hills, and Nebraska Nat asked:

"You do not think Parson Perkins in any way connected with those villains, do you Hasty?"

The old miner nodded gravely.

"I w'u'dn't be more'n hafe s'prised ef ther critter turned out to be their chief," he declared.

Another groan of anguish burst from Holmes's lips.

"Heaven save my dear child!" he uttered, brokenly.

Nebraska Nat did not look up from the trail, which he was following like a hound, but he said just loud enough for the grieving parent to clearly distinguish his words:

"Don't take it so hard, Holmes. We will save her or die in trying."

"Thet we will," agreed 'Bijah Bigfist, warmly. "I don't reckon there's one o' this gang but'd wade through blood fer Leetle Blue-Eyes."

"Ef thar is he'd orter be shot!" was grim Old Hasty's instant assertion, and the '49er glared around as if in search of such a contemptible individual.

Big 'Bijah chuckled softly to himself.

"He's caught it!" he muttered. He's caught it!"

Suddenly Nebraska Nat halted and sprung down from his horse to examine the indications.

"What is it?" asked one.

"The kidnapper was joined here by at least a dozen others," was the startling assertion.

"Which pritty nighly proves thet I was right 'bout his bein' Cap'n Hawk," cried Old Hasty.

The trailers indulged in a brief consultation, some favoring turning back and obtaining reinforcements from the train, others wishing to push the pursuit. The latter party finally prevailed, and once more they went on at a brisk gallop, the broad trail being quite easy to follow.

For a time the trail led straight toward the Hills, but finally it began to bear to the right. Nat looked puzzled and shook his head soberly.

"I don't exactly know what this means," he admitted.

Onward they went till near midday and still the trail bore slowly to the right. Noon found them on the open plains with the Hills over their left shoulders.

"Ef this continners ter continner, we'll be back ter camp by night," muttered Old Hasty.

"Thar's su'thin' wrong!" said 'Bijah Bigfist, in a tone intended for his California pard's ears only.

Suddenly Nebraska Nat dismounted and examined the trail intently. When he straightened up there was a look of anger and dismay on his face.

"What is it Nat?" asked Martin Holmes, fancying he could tell that the guide had made an unpleasant discovery.

"Well, I'm free to admit that I am beaten," Nat acknowledged. "It isn't often that I am sold in this way, but I've been tricked this time."

"How?" demanded the trailers, in chorus.

"Well, for some time I have noticed that this trail was growing fainter and fainter. At last, I dismounted right here, and I have discovered that more than two-thirds of the gang we are pursuing have dropped off somewhere."

Old Hasty uttered a snort of disgust.

"An' you never knowed when they done et?"

"No, for it was done in some unaccountable manner. Their horses left no trails."

"Thet hain't posserble."

Nebraska Nat flushed with anger.

"Do you doubt my word?" he asked, warmly.

"Wal, ye may be mistook—ye may not hev noticed ther tracks w'en they turned off."

The guide laughed in an unpleasant manner.

"Look here, Hasty," he said, fixing his dark eyes on the old man's face, "do you take this whole crowd for a mess of fools, yourself included? Do you think that if the gang had left an easy trail as they turned off one by one, not one of this entire crowd would have noticed any of them? Old man, you are trying to make out that you know less than the greenest tenderfoot in the Territory!"

"Wal, it do look like sum o' us 'd orter no-tissed ther critters' tracks," the '49er admitted. "But, how ye goin' ter 'splain ther case?"

"I see only one way, and that not a very satisfactory one," was Nat's reply. "They must have had some kind of an arrangement to put around their horses' feet, and they left the party one by one, stealing away when the nature of the ground admitted of their doing so without leaving much of a trail."

"And one of them may have taken Hattie with him!" groaned Martin Holmes. "We may be entirely off the track!"

There was no denying that, and the trailers could only gaze into each other's faces in dismay.

The result of a serious conversation was a decision to follow on the trail before them, and trust to Providence.

Noon passed, the day sped away, night came—darkness settled over the plains.

At sunset seven weary, hungry, heart-heavy men were riding over the prairie directly toward the far distant Hills.

"Ef we keep on we'll hit ther train summares over yan'," Bijah Bigfist observed. "This durned trail has led us a cussed chase!"

Martin Holmes said nothing, but his head was bowed on his breast, and his aspect was that of a heartbroken man.

On through the night they went, making no further attempt to follow the deceitful trail.

Suddenly the faint breeze bore the sound of far distant rifle-shots to their ears.

"W'at's thet?" demanded Old Hasty.

For reply, far away across the plains, a red flame shot upward. Then faintly to their ears came the sound of a wild chorus of savage cries of joy and triumph.

"Great God!" gasped Nat. "The train has been attacked by the red devils! Shove your horses, men—come on!"

CHAPTER III.

A WARNING FROM ABOVE.

NIGHT amid the Black Hills.

Within the secluded depths of a deep ravine a small camp-fire was burning, and by its light the faces and forms of two men were revealed. The younger was a man nearly, if not quite, fifty years of age. His attire and general air proclaimed him a man of some culture, and it was quite apparent that he was not a mountain ranger or plainsman. Instead, he appeared much like a tenderfoot fresh from the cities of the East. After a fashion, he was rather a good-looking person—some might have called him handsome. But, it was useless to deny that there was a decidedly sinister expression about his eyes, although the aspect of his features was concealed by the full black beard which he wore.

The individual gave his name as Noel Kenyon, and claimed to be from New York. Despite the fact that he professed to be an Easterner, his companion had discovered that he was well "heeled," although he did not make a display of his weapons. There was something about the man that caused Old Dismal Dan to believe that he would be a decidedly unpleasant person to have for an enemy.

Dismal Dan was the other camper—a grizzled veteran of the mountains and plains, who appeared to be sixty years of age. He was at least six feet tall and so thin that he seemed but a mass of skin and bones. He was attired in a mixed suit of buckskin and woolen garments, and his clothes seemed to have shrunk in a vain endeavor to get closer to his thin limbs. The belt around his waist contained a brace of revolvers and a knife. A Winchester rifle lay close beside him, making it evident that the old man knew good weapons when he saw them.

The old borderman was the possessor of the longest and most mournful face imaginable, and his voice was a cross between a sigh and a groan. He was naturally a sad man; no one—it was said—had ever seen him smile. He imagined that the sorrows and sufferings of the greater part of humanity had been cast upon his shoulders and he was forced to bear them. For this reason those who knew him had given him the name of "Dismal Dan"—Daniel Sudly being his real name.

Dismal Dan was as well acquainted with the fastnesses of the Black Hills as was any living man, and he had been employed by Noel Kenyon to aid in finding an old hermit, who was supposed to live somewhere in the most unfrequented part of the strange land. Both reds and whites told peculiar stories of the hermit, who was feared by the former and shunned by the latter.

It was said that with the hermit of the Gold Hills lived his daughter, a maiden as graceful as the wild fawn and as fair as the mountain violet. Several prospectors who had wandered into that part of the Hills where the old solitary was supposed to live had seen this vision of beauty—so they said. But, it must be confessed that their stories were not always believed. Some even doubted the existence of such a girl.

These stories had reached the ear of Noel Kenyon, who had lately arrived in the Hills, and with little delay, he secured the services of Old Dismal to aid him in finding the hermit's haunt. Dan claimed to know pretty nearly where the recluse's home was to be found, for he

said he had seen him several times. But, the old man knew nothing of the girl save what he had heard from those who professed to have seen her.

"No, I hev never sot eyes onter her, though I hev seen ther ole crazy coon," he replied, in answer to a question from Kenyon. "But, I reckon, ef thar is secher gal, I kin fin' her fer ye ef ary livin' on top o' this here sorrerful earth kin do et."

So Dan's services were engaged, and we find the two men encamped in the very heart of the Hills.

"How much further have we to go, Dan, ere we get into the vicinity where you expect our game?" asked Kenyon.

"Not a turrible sight fuder," groaned the old borderman. "Ef we hed got ter, I jest want ter flop down an' never git up! The roomyticks are gittin' a powerful bolt onter me, an' I feel like I wuz an ole plugged-out hoss. I tell ye I'm gittin' on torruds ther final end-up o' my 'arthly career. Ther Angil Gabriel 'll be tootin' ther supper-horn fer me pritty soon, an' I'll go in fer ther long night's rest. I don't reckon nobuddy 'll miss Ole Dan. Ah! this is er worl' o' sufferin' an' sorrer!"

"Dan, you're a dismal old crank," was Kenyon's none too comforting or complimentary declaration.

The old border tramp looked reprcachfully at his companion.

"Waal," he drawled, "ef you'd gone through a tenth part o' what I hav, you'd be dismal. Weepin' Isreal! w'at hain't I endoored! I've hal' most every diseese in ther cattygory frum ther meesles ter ther small pox—an' I still live! But, pashent Job! I'm all stove up!"

"That's all in your imagination, old man," smiled the Easterner. "You are in better shape to-day and can stand more than half the men of your age."

"But, let that drop. I am more interested in this hermit and his supposed daughter than I am in your ills and sufferings."

"No doubt o' thet," whined Dan, in disgust. "Nobuddy seems ter hev no sympathy fer me. W'at ye want ter say 'bout ther hermit?"

"Do you think we can find him to-morrow?"

"Dunno. Sech things are mighty onsartin in this worl' o' woe."

"But you say we are near where he is to be found."

"An' I'll stick to et; but thet's no sign thet we shell fin' him ter-morrer."

"Well, I will hope that we may. I must find this man, for I am pretty sure that he is one who served me a most dastardly trick, years ago, and if I am not mistaken, that girl whom he calls his daughter is more to me than to him."

"Dunno as he calls her his darter. Nobuddy ever heerd 'im call her thet, ter my knollege; but ther men as hev see'd her thort as how she must be his darter."

Kenyon was silent for several moments, gazing meditatively into the dying fire. There was a deep scowl on his face, and he looked like a man who was perplexed. Dan watched him slyly, but said nothing.

After a time, Kenyon exclaimed fiercely:

"Curse him!"

"Curses ginerally cum home ter roost," muttered the guide.

The Easterner heard his words, but did not catch their import.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothin'," answered Dan. "I wuz jest a-thinkin' how queer it wuz thet you are so interested in this ole hermit."

Kenyon hesitated for a minute, and then said:

"Dan, you have not tried to pry into my business, although it must have seemed queer that I should be searching for this strange man of whom so little is known. You have asked no questions, but have kept your curocity to yourself, if you felt any. Now, I am willing to tel you why I am so desirous of finding this strange old hermit."

"Needn't putt yerself out; but, ef so be ye wants ter tell, w'y shove erhead."

"Well," smiled Kenyon, "I do feel in the mood to talk just now, and so I will tell you. As I said, if I am not greatly mistaken, the girl who is known as the hermit's daughter is more to me than to him, but, at the same time, she is in no way related to either of us. To begin at the beginning:

"Years ago—just how many I will not say—I fell in love with a beautiful girl. Grace Marshal was the belle of Southport, a good old-fashioned New England town. She had suitors by the score, but I was not long in learning that I had only one dangerous rival. As fortune had it, this rival was an old college chum and the dearest friend I had on earth outside my own family, having once saved me from drowning. We soon came to an understanding. Neither would withdraw from the field, but both would do their best to win Gracie's love. When either had succeeded, the other was to withdraw—but not till that time. It was an honorable agreement, and was honorably kept."

"My friend won, but I shall never forget the look of actual pain that was on his face when I offered him congratulations. There was really tears in his eyes as he wrung my hand, but I do

not remember what he said, for my heart was too heavy. I only recollect that he said something about me being the more worthy of the two. The next day I left Southport forever. I did not correspond with my friend, for I could not bear to do so."

"Several years passed and I heard nothing of my friend or the fair girl I had lost and he had won. I wandered through a dozen different countries and finally found myself in my native land again. I little thought of the sad news that I was soon to hear."

"How I learned of it, matters little, but intelligence came to me that my friend was dead and that his wife—my old sweetheart—lay at death's door. I hastened to ascertain if the report was true, and found that it was. Then I lost little time in reaching her side."

"I found her on her death-bed—I will not attempt to describe that meeting. 'Twas not long before I learned things which amazed and filled me with rage. She had married the man she loved, but had been disowned by her own family for doing so. They had intended her for a rich man and Richard was poor. But, the dear boy had lots of pluck, and, feeling that he had a fortune in his beautiful wife, he started out to secure fame and worldly wealth. He never obtained either. A little baby-girl came to bless their union, and for three years they were happy. Then a fatal disease seized upon my friend and death claimed him for his own."

"Grace was a plucky little woman, and after Richard—poor boy!—was laid at rest, she took up the battle for bread. At that time her health was not very good, and it did not take her long to ruin it quite. Then she was taken sick, and I found her on the bed from which she never arose, little Alsie trying in her childish way to do what she could for her mamma. Certain it is that she did not lack for care from that time till she was beyond needing earthly care."

"Little Alsie was given into my care, and I promised the dying mother to treat the girl as if she were my own child. If I have not done so, it has been through no fault of mine."

"When Alsie was seven, I got the gold-fever and rushed to California. The child I left in Iowa, in care of an old man and woman, both of whom were decidedly queer, but seemed like good people. I made arrangements for the continuance of her education, and promised to send money for her support, paying a good round sum down. If I did not send the money when I promised, it was because I did not have it to send. But when I returned to Iowa three years later, Moses Mason's wife was dead, and Crazy Mose—as some called him—was gone, none knew whither. He had taken little Alsie with him, and from the time I left the child with him to this day I have not seen her. I have searched in every conceivable place, all to no avail. Crazy Mose and Alsie seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth."

"Now, Dan, you must understand why I wish to find this old hermit. Something causes me to think that he may be Crazy Mose, and his supposed daughter be Alsie."

Dismal Dan had maintained silence while Kenyon told his story, and now when he seemed on the point of speaking he was prevented in a singular and startling manner.

From the darkness above their heads came a burst of wild, blood-chilling laughter, causing them to seize their weapons and leap to their feet. Then a small, round object shot downward, falling on the ground at Kenyon's feet. A glance showed the Easterner that it was a piece of paper wrapped around a stone.

In a moment he had it in his hand. It was covered with writing, and Kenyon did not hesitate to quickly remove it from the stone, that he might examine it.

This is what he read:

"Death ahead; life behind—turn back!"

CHAPTER IV.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

ONLY a single line, written in a scrawling, almost illegible mass of hooks and angles, yet it was fraught with a terrible import. "Death ahead; life behind!" He was given his choice, to go forward and die, or turn back and live. There was no signature to this strange warning.

Like one dazed Kenyon held the slip of paper in his hand, staring at the writing upon it. He was aroused by the voice of Dismal Dan, as the old man hissed:

"W'at is it? Durn my optics! w'at's ther row?"

The old man was both startled and excited, but the instant he heard it he knew that the wild laugh did not come from the throat of a red-skin. Once before he had heard that very laugh, and that when encamped within less than five miles of that spot. He had seen the individual who gave utterance to the laugh, and now he was pretty sure that the laughter was the old hermit whom Noel Kenyon was in search of.

The Easterner was too dazed to answer Dan's question, but one stride carried the long-legged guide to Kenyon's side.

"Sorrerful Sampson!" grunted the old man. "Paper-writin'! W'at is it, pard?"

"A warning," replied Kenyon. "Read for yourself."

"Read!—w'at, thet?" snorted Dan, in disgust. "W'at d'yer took me fer? I can't read French!"

"It says: 'Death ahead; life behind—turn back!'"

"Waal, I sw'ar!"

The old Hills ranger drawled forth the exclamation—if exclamation it could be called—in a way that was decidedly comical. On his face was a look of mingled wonder and indignation.

"Ef I hain't er fool, thet wuz ther ole hermit as guv thet laff," Dan declared after a time.

"And now I am positive that he is Crazy Mose, and that I am on the right trail!" exclaimed Kenyon, with growing excitement. "If not, why this warning? He hopes to frighten me away; but, I am not easily scared. I will have what I came for, or leave my bones in these Hills!"

"Waal, there's er mighty good show fer doin' thet. 'Twixt ther reds, ther Hawks an' this crazy ole sallymander, ther chances are thet we'll find it mighty warm afore we git back ter Custer."

"But I will not turn back. I am bound to find the hermit. If you are alarmed, I fancy I can get along without you."

"Thankee fer northin'. No man ever knew Dismal Dan ter squawk, an' I don't reckon he'll begin now."

"But, can we not find this old hermit to-night? It seems that I cannot wait till morning. He is near—is somewhere up above us."

"Guess ye'r putty nigh kirekt 'bout thet, an' ef he tuck er noshun, he c'u'd send a big bowlder down hyer ez easy ez thet leetle stun. Then, oh then, w'are'd we be? Somehow this don't strike me ez bein' er healthy kentry in this hyer pertic'ler spot."

For a moment Kenyon was silent. The man's nerves seemed to have been shaken by the startling warning. At last he spoke:

"You are right, Dan; we had better change our camping-place. Crazy Mose might creep up on us in the night and knife us both."

Dan gave vent to a snort of disgust.

"W'at d'yer took me fer?" he snapped. "D'yer s'pose we're both goin' ter snooze to-night, after this? Waal, I reckon not! I've got er leetle too much boss-sense fer thet. We've got ter took turns at snoozin', while t'other feller watches. Ef anybuddy creeps in on us it'll be ther fault o' ther guard."

"Well, let's be getting away from here," urged Kenyon, glancing nervously around.

With a kick, Dismal sent the few remaining brands of the fire flying in several different directions, plunging the surroundings in gloom.

"Foller," said the old man, softly, and like two shadows they crept away down the ravine.

That night they camped in a secluded spot nearly a mile away. They did not build a fire, for it was not needed, the other one having been made against the counsel of the old ranger. It was decided that Dan should act as guard the first part of the night and Kenyon take his place near midnight.

"Git all ther sleep ye kin, pard," advised Dan, "fer thar's hustlin' ahead. We'll hit Wind Canyon ter-morrer, an' I reckon our man won't be fur frum thar."

"Wind Canyon—where's that?" asked the Easterner, with a yawn.

"Due west from hyer, jest how fur I dunno. Git ter snoozin'!"

Finding that the guide would make no further talk, Kenyon followed his advice.

Near midnight the Easterner was aroused from a sound sleep to take Dan's place, while the guide obtained some rest.

Morning came, and at the first peep of day, Dismal awoke. He sat up and gazed around for his companion, but the gray light that was creeping down into the place did not reveal the form of Noel Kenyon. Dan appeared to be alone.

"Wunder whar ther critter is?" muttered the old man.

He arose and looked around, but still his vision was not rewarded by seeing the man he was looking for.

"Waal, this hyer beats ther Jews!" he drawled. "Has ther blamed sardeen absconded? An' ef he has, w'y has he?"

Dan made no attempt to answer his own question but continued to look for his companion of the day before. Half an hour of searching brought no further result than to convince the old Hills ranger that Kenyon was not in that vicinity. If the man had stolen away and left him, with no intention of returning, Dismal was at a loss to understand just why he did so.

"Pr'aps ther blamed fool thort he c'u'd fin' ther hermit 'thout my 'sistance an' so he guv me ther go-by," mused Dan. "Ef thet's so, wait till I git my two eyes onter ther two-faced whelp ergin. Pashent Job! won't thar be a time! Waal, I sh'u'd shout! It is er sorrerful thing ter contemplate ther 'mount o' decepshun an' deceet thar is in this great wide, wicked worl', an' I reckon as how I've bin taken in an' dun

fer ez offen ez ary other individooal ever wuz. This looks like er case o' sold ergin, an' at a mighty low price."

But the old borderman did not seem particularly distressed over the situation, for, without further delay, he proceeded to produce a supply of jerked beef and satisfy the cravings of the "inner man". When his hunger was sated he arose to his feet, saying grimly:

"Now ter look arter thet slip'ry skunk. Ther chances are thet he has struck fer Wind Canyon an' I believe I'll lean thet way. When we meet—weepin' Isreel!—won't there be a rustlin' in ther bushes! It's er sorrerful fac' that I do feel jest a dite riled."

Rifle in hand, the old tramp started on the journey. Sunrise found him well on his way. As he trudged along he talked to himself in a low, monotonous drawl.

"Per'aps thet warnin' as Ole Ken got las' nite kinder upshot 'im an' sent 'im skootin', though I can't jest understan' w'y it sh'u'd cause 'im ter skin out an' leave me without even sayin' hullo. There's suthin' 'bout this business what I jest don't understan'. Ken tole er mighty slick story 'bout ther gal an' how he got her in ther fu'st place an' then how he lost her; but somehow I c'u'dn't holp wonderin' ef 'twus all straight. Ef he lied—

"I'm goin' ter fin' the ole hermit 'fore I turn back, fer I must 'low thet I'm er bit interested in him an' his gal—ef she is his, an' ef thar is ary gal. Pr'aps, ef thar is er gal, thet thar Kenyon is her wu'st foe 'stead o' bein' her frien'. Ef so, I hope ter thunder ther ole hermit 'll wring ther two-faced whelp's neck!"

Talking thus to himself, Dismal made his way over the ground at quite a rapid pace, his long legs seeming tireless. It was near midday when he entered Wind Canyon. Without hesitation, he pushed down into the depths of the deep gorge, which is one of the strangest, most weird and dismal fissures in the entire Black Hills country. For once in his life, Dan Sudly looked more cheerful than his surroundings.

Following the little stream of water, which seemed to sigh and complain as it stole downward over its rocky bed, the old Range Tramp made his way into the shadows. The midday hour was past when he reached a part of the canyon that seemed less dismal than that through which he had been passing. Then, looking up, Dan was surprised to perceive a canvas tent just ahead, and in front of it a party of three young fellows who appeared to be enjoying an after dinner siesta.

CHAPTER V.

THE YOUNG MINERS.

DISMAL DAN halted in amazement.

"Pashent Job!"

With remarkable swiftness, the old Hills ranger brought his Winchester round ready for use, for he realized that the young men by the tent might prove to be deadly foes. His sharp eyes quickly fell on some sluices not far from the tent, and he instantly recognized the fact that the sleeping youths were miners who had probably discovered a profitable placer in the gloomy depths of Wind Canyon. Dan knew that he might be considered a decidedly unwelcome visitor.

"Waal, I'll be skinned!" muttered the Range Tramp. "Looks like thar wuz sumbuddy thar. They're takin' it easy; don't look like they wuz 'spectin' company. Wonder who in ther name o' Sufferin' Sampson they be? W'y, ef I wuz an Injun I c'u'd creep up an' lift their scalps while they snoozed, an' they'd never know northin' 'bout it."

At this moment one of the young men sat up and discovered the presence of the old borderman. A startled exclamation broke from his lips, arousing his companions.

"I'm spotted now," muttered Dismal. "Thar hain't no backin' out."

Without further hesitation, the old tramp advanced, holding his rifle ready for use in case it was necessary. His face looked longer and more mournful than usual, and he seemed like a man who had just lost his last friend.

"Waal, waal!" he drawled: "ef I hain't stumbled rite onter a passil o' human critters hyer in this sorrerful spot! W'y, children, hullo!"

One of the young fellows, who seemed to be a sort of leader, had sprung up and now stood with a revolver in his hand, regarding the old man curiously.

"Who in sin's name?" exclaimed the youth with the revolver. "It can't be Old Dismal Dan?"

"Reckon thet's 'bout ther size o' my handle," the old ranger admitted, as he surveyed the speaker closely. "But, sumhow, I jest don't seem ter ketch holt o' your cog, though yer phiz seems natteral like."

The young man put up his revolver and came forward, holding out his hand and laughing.

"Dan, you old sinner!" he cried, with undisguised joy: "have you plumb forgotten me?"

A sudden light broke over the old man's face and eagerly he grasped the proffered hand, although his solemn features looked as gloomy as ever.

"Weepin' Isreel! Is it you, leetle tenderfut?"

W'y, bless my beastly luck! I'd ez quick thort o' meetin' ther Angel Gabreel—I w'u'd, durned ef I w'u'dn't!"

"On the other hand, I've been on the outlook for you, Daniel. I heard that you were in the Hills, and I hoped to have the good luck to meet the man who once rescued me from the clutch of a big bear—in fact, saved my life. I was a tenderfoot then, but they don't call me that now. You remember that you taught me to handle the rifle, and it is a compliment to you to say that my proficiency with that weapon has caused those who know me to call me Rifle Roy."

Dan surveyed the youth from head to foot, and despite the gravity of his features, a twinkle of admiration stole into his faded blue eyes.

"Waal, lad, ye hev growed since I saw ye las', an' I don't want ter flatter ye, but ye look more like a man. You wuz green then, but I saw thar wuz good timber in ye. An' so Royal Raymon' is Rifle Roy now! A good name, lad."

The youth was truly a manly-appearing fellow, being tall, straight, and well-formed, with dark, handsome features and an abundance of curling hair. His eyes were keen and piercing, yet were not unpleasant. The contour of his chin showed that he was not lacking in force of character, and could be stern—even commanding—if the occasion demanded it.

He was dressed in a stout, serviceable suit of clothes, which were made for wear rather than for appearance, but which could not conceal the grace of his well-knit figure. The leather belt around his waist supported the usual brace of revolvers and knife, their presence being almost an absolute necessity if, at that time, one wished to "preserve his health" in the Black Hills country.

After the warmth of the unexpected meeting between the old Range Tramp and his young friend had subsided somewhat, Rifle Roy turned toward his companions, saying to Dan:

"Old pard, let me introduce you to my mates, Jolly Jack Dillon and his Highness, Tobias Tad-back."

Then, for the first time, Dan noticed that one of the party was a negro lad of not more than seventeen, and not very large for his age. Toby was the possessor of a remarkably sharp, jolly-looking face, and teeth which made their presence known whenever he opened his mouth. He was an intelligent-looking little scamp, and his lively ways and cute sayings had served to enliven many a monotonous hour passed in the strange mountain gorge.

The darky now surveyed the old ranger wonderingly. After a moment he ventured to observe:

"My golly! ain't he high!"

The muscles of Dismal's solemn face did not relax in the least, but he gravely offered the little darky his hand, which was as soberly accepted, while Toby stared straight into the old man's sad-looking countenance.

"I'm happy ter meet ye, you little chunk o' darkness," asserted Dan.

"By Jinks! yo' don' look tickled ter deff," was the instant retort.

"Young man," said the Range Tramp, slowly, "ef you'd seen ther trials an' tribbylashuns what I hev you w'u'dn't feel like laffin' all ther time."

"Spec' not. But I tell yo' w'at dat face ob yo'n mecks me t'ink ob."

"What?"

"A semmertary."

"Why?"

"Beca'se it looks ser grave!"

Then Toby's teeth gleamed out suddenly and he indulged in a burst of wild laughter.

"Toby, you infernal young rascal, close that fly-trap and give us a rest!" commanded Jolly Jack, stepping quickly forward. "You must use more respect toward strangers. I hope you will pardon him," to Dan. "He is full of just such jags and—"

"I hav' ter let 'em off sumtimes or bus!" declared the little darky, making haste to get beyond Jack's reach.

"Weepin' Isreel! you needn't think thet I mind thet," sighed Dan, while his eyes followed Toby's retreating form, a kindly look in their depths. "Ef any one kin joke in this hyer worl' o' tribbylashun, let 'em joke. Ez fer me, I've seen ser much sorrer an' sadness thet I can't joke ef I want ter."

Jack Dillon was a slight, slender lad of eighteen, with a pleasant, agreeable face and twinkling blue eyes. His was a rather pretty face, yet not at all effeminate or weak. Apparently of a happy-go-lucky disposition, full of life and buoyancy, it was but natural that he should be called "Jolly Jack." He was dressed much the same as Rifle Roy.

Dismal Dan shook hands with Jack, giving him a cordial grip and receiving a warm pressure in return.

"I'll be skinned ef I hain't glad I've found you fellers!" the old borderman declared. "I'm so durned hongry thet my stummick is crowdin' my spinal collum."

"You shall have all you can eat, Dan," said Roy, quickly. "We have plenty of provender. I will have Toby get out the food, and you can enjoy a good square meal."

It was not long before the new-comer in camp was partaking of the best the place afforded, while the boys sat near by and talked, finding considerable amusement in the old man's queer ways and expressions. Toby kept a little in the background, but he managed to put in a word now and then which served well as spice. Finally, Dan asked:

"How in ther name o' Sufferin' Sampson did you fellers happen to stub inter this hoel?"

"It was an accident," Roy replied. "We were prospecting, and Fate led us into this canyon. To Jack is due the honor of discovering this placer. It has proved a very paying find thus far, but it is worth all we get to stay in this dismal hole. The place should have been called Dismal Canyon, for it is the most lonely place I was ever in."

"By golly! dat's er fac'," Toby muttered, soberly. "It am jes' cram-full ob spookses."

Rifle Roy continued:

"Often at night the wind howls through here as if it were mad. At other times it will sob and wail after a manner that is blood-chilling. It reminds one of a lost child perishing in a storm. More than once at the dead of night I have awakened and sat up, feeling sure that I had heard some one calling for help. Even when one is fully awake, it is not a hard thing to fancy that one hears voices calling. Sometimes it will begin away down the canyon in a faint, murmuring wail, and will gradually approach, growing louder and louder as it does so. When it sweeps past this spot it is terrifying in its intensity and the dreadful agony that seems to be expressed in a mingled shriek of pain and howl of rage."

"Oh, it is pleasant in the extreme!" laughed Jolly Jack.

"During a storm," continued Roy, "it is enough to make one's hair stand. There has been one storm since we came here, and I hope there will not be another till we get out. I do not think it possible to imagine anything so grandly awful as that was, and I am sure it is not in my power to describe it. As for Toby, he tucked his head beneath a blanket and kept it there till the agony was over."

"Dar," cried Toby, in disgust, "w'at fo' yo' wants ter tole dat! Seems lek I cawn't nebber learn yo' ter keep nuffin' ter yo'se'f, boy!"

"But the storms are not all the queer things there are around this place," put in Jolly Jack.

"Da's er fac'," averred the little darky. "Dey's suffin' wussen de squarms. Dar's dat ole feller wif de white ha'r. Hi, golly! he's de debbil hisself!"

"W'at's thet?" asked Dan, eagerly.

"One of Toby's spooks," laughed Jack.

"Perhaps you have heard of a strange old hermit who is said to live somewhere amid these hills?" said Roy, inquiringly.

Dan admitted that he had.

"Well, I am convinced that we have seen him several times, and that his home is not far from this spot."

Of course this information interested Dan, and by skillful inquiry, he succeeded in learning all that the boys knew or had seen of the old hermit. When they had finished, he told them his story of the engagement with Noel Kenyon to aid him in finding the old hermit and his daughter. He also related Kenyon's story as near as he could remember it, and told of the strange warning and disappearance which followed.

Jolly Jack started up with an exclamation of triumph and delight.

"I knew it!" he cried. "Roy said I dreamed it, but I knew better. I saw it as plainly as I ever saw anything in my life."

"W'at's thet?" asked Dan, feeling interested, although he knew not why.

"Night before last I awoke near midnight at a time when the moon was pouring her light down into the canyon. The flap of the tent was open, and to my amazement I saw a form standing just without, looking in upon us—a female! You can imagine how startled I was at first, but I lay perfectly still and watched the strange visitor curiously. Of course the shadow within the tent prevented her from discovering that I was awake. After a few moments she turned her face so that the moonlight fell fairly upon it, and it was the handsomest face it has ever been my fortune to gaze upon."

"Done smashed on er spookess!" grinned Toby.

"A moment later," continued the young miner, "she started to move away. For a moment I remained motionless, not knowing just what to do. Then I resolved to follow her. Springing up silently, I stepped to the opening of the tent and looked around. The midnight visitor had vanished! In vain I looked up and down the canyon—no living thing was in view. I went back and spent the remainder of the night in thinking and dreaming of the beautiful unknown. In the morning I told the boys of what I had seen. Toby said it was a spook; Roy declared I had been dreaming. That was all the satisfaction I could get out of them, but I firmly believed that I saw a living woman—or girl—in front of this tent that night. Now that you say the old hermit has a daughter, I am sure of it."

Dismal Dan had been an interested listener and the old Hills ranger now agreed readily with Jack, saying that without doubt he had seen the hermit's daughter. Roy was forced to confess that this might be so, but Toby clung to his belief that Jack had seen a "spookess."

When Dismal could eat no more, Toby cleared away the food. Then the queer Range Tramp lit his pipe and the conversation continued. Neither of the three young miners did much work that afternoon.

Night was at hand when out of the shadows which were gathering in Wind Canyon stalked a tall, gaunt-looking man, who was attired in dark, clerical-appearing clothes, and resembled a tenderfoot "Gospel sharp." Without hesitation, he advanced directly toward the little tent and the four persons sitting in front of it.

The clerical-appearing stranger was Parson Phineas Perkins!

CHAPTER VI.

A VISION OF THE NIGHT.

"PASHENT JOB! who's thet?" exclaimed Dismal, a revolver leaving his belt for a place in his hand.

"Don't know him," replied Roy.

"Halt thar, stranger," commanded the old borderman, rising on one knee and bringing his revolver to bear on the advancing man. "Who are ye an' w'at d'yer want?"

The Parson halted promptly enough.

"How dare ye stop a servant ov the Lord?" he demanded.

"So thet's ther kind o' er job ye'r tied ter, is it?" drawled Dan. "Waal, we kinder thort ye looked like er Gospil-slinger. Who are ye, pilgrim, an' whar ye frum?"

"My name is Perkins—Phineas Perkins—and I am a nateral citizen ov the State ov Vermont. I hav' had a call to work in the vineyard ov the Lord."

"Waal, I must say you are goin' a long ways outer ther reglar trail ter git thar. I don't reckon ther veenyard is located anywheres roun' these hyer parts."

"Poor sinner! hav' a care not to scoff at the Lord's humble workers! Rememberest thou the fate that befell the children who mocked the prophet ov old?"

"They made fodder fer h'ars," replied the old ranger, promptly. "Oh, I'm posted onter ther Bible!"

"Then hav' a care or you may meet a similar fate—reely you may."

"I'm goin' ter let him cum inter ther camp limits," said Dan to Roy, in a low tone. "Look out fer him, an' ef ye see anything crooked, we'll fire him."

The Parson did not hesitate to advance when given permission.

"It does mine eyesight good to once more behold human people," declared the stranger, with a weary sigh. "I feared that perchance I might wander threw these ere little hills till I perished ov hunger and thirst. But the Lord is good to his unworthy servants."

"How in ther name o' Sufferin' Sampson did ye happen ter be prowlin' roun' in these parts?" asked Dan.

"I fell into the hands ov evil men, but the King ov Kings delivered me from my bondage, praise his name!"

Then Parson Perkins told them of the emigrant train and the people who composed it. He dwelt in particular on the loveliness and charms of Hattie Holmes, "the Queen of the Train." It was not long before Dan and the boys discovered that the Parson had been deeply smitten by the girl's pretty face and charming ways. After dilating on the maiden's charms for some time, the Parson told them of Nebraska Nat and soon made it apparent that he was desperately jealous of the guide.

"Often I could not slumber nights—reely I could not," declared Perkins. "Sumtimes I would approach nigh unto the place where Miss Hattie slept and would keep watch that no harm came to the tender flower of the peerary. Last night erlong in the silent hours I awaked. I thought I heered a v'ice whisper in my ear—whisper that danger threatened the tender flower. I riz up and made my way torred the place wheer she slumbered. Jest as I came wheer I could see the waggin, a tall, dark figger passed me, kerrying a big bundle in his arms. My heart hopped right intew my mouth and like a shadder I follered the dark form, feeling sart'in that the big bundle he kerried was poor Miss Hattie. I hadn't taken more'n ten steps before I was struck ontew the back ov the head and that was the last I knew for a long time."

"When I rekindled I found that I was tied up all over, han's and feet, and was ontew the back ov a hoss, bein' kerried sumwhere. There was a cloth over my eyes so that I could not see wheer I was going and a piece of wood in my mouth so that I could not speak. I could only pray the Lord tew deilver me outer the han's ov mine enemies. Praise His name! he answered my prayer."

"I lissened and could hear other hosses all around the one that I was ontew. I felt that I was in the han's ov a band ov despeera't men. I can't tell heow long that ride lasted, but it seemed days tew me. I don't know jest when them that

I was with left the others, but after a time, I found that I was with two men who rid on both sides ov me. They did not speak a word as they rid erlong and did not stop till I felt sure it was morning. At last one ov them sed:

"We'll leave the critter hyer."

"Yes," sed the other. "This is a fu'st-class place fer wolves."

"Then they both laffed and pulled up. It did not take the sinners long tew take me off that hoss and tie me tew a tree, wheer they left me tew peerish with the gag still in my mouth and the cloth over my eyes. But Heaven was mindful of unworthy me. The evil men did not tie my hands secure and after a despirit struggle, I succeeded in getting them free. It was not long before I was a free man, thanks tew the mercy ov Providence!"

"When I reemoved the bandaig from my eyes I diskivered that it was morning and I was among these 'ere hills. Then I started tew find friends if possorable. The Lord led me to this spot. I am hungry and need rest."

"You shall have food and a place to snooze," said Rifle Roy, before Dan could speak.

"The Lord will reward you," declared the Parson.

Dan looked at the Down-Easter suspiciously but said nothing. At a word from Roy, Toby produced such food as the camp was stocked with, and without delay Parson Perkins began eating.

While the professed "servant of the Lord" satisfied the cravings of his appetite the old borderman questioned him closely. Ere the Parson had finished eating Dan arose, and making a covert motion to Roy, moved away down the canyon. The youth understood the signal and followed. At a short distance from the camp—just beyond earshot if a person spoke low—Dan halted and waited for Roy.

"What is it, Dan?" asked the leader of the young miners, as he came up.

"Boy," said the old man, soberly, "thet thar Parson is er double-distilled fraud or I don't know my he'd frum er hoel in ther groun'!"

"What makes you think so, old man?"

"Leetle pard, I hain't ser green ez I uster wus, an' it takes er mighty good man ter pull ther wool over my peepers. I've seen corn-sidderable o' life in this hyer sinful an' sorrerful worl' an' hev knocked roun' in hyer an' thar an' ther other place. I've beerd er pile o' Down-Easters chin an' I never beerd one thet talked like thet galoot. W'at's thet signify?"

"You say."

"He's er fraud. He tries ter talk like er Yankee, an' makes er misserable mess o' it. Thet hain't all—he don't talk erlike more'n half ther time!"

Rifle Roy could not repress a smile, caused by the old man's concluding statement, although he was convinced that there was something in Dan's words.

"You mean that he gets his dialect mixed?"

"Dunno nuthin' 'bout his dierlec," was the short reply; "but he gits his talk mixed. He can't fool yer Uncle Dan."

"Who do you think he is?"

"Waal, now, lad, it's hard tellin'. He may be white, but ther chances are ter the contrary. Ter be course you've beerd o' ther Hawks o' ther Black Hills?"

"Bet your life!"

"An' ye never heard no good o' them. They're ther wu'st set o' cut-throats livin'. P'raps this hyer Parson is connected with them sumhow."

The idea was startling, to say the least.

"His story 'bout bein' knocked silly an' lugged away from an emmygrant train won't wash. He tole it in mighty pore shape, an' thet made er pore lie seem er durned sight porer."

"I think you are right, Dan; but what's to be done?"

"Keep er sharp eye onter ther creeter. W'y, Weepin' Isreel ef we dcn't watch him, he may knife us all in ther nite!"

When they walked back to camp, they had decided not to relax their vigilant watch on Parson Perkins night or day.

By this time darkness had settled over the Hills.

At the camp Dan and Roy found Parson Perkins stretched at full length in front of the tent, talking to Jack and Toby. They listened a moment, and found that the man from Vermont was attempting to explain the Scriptures.

Dan sat down and listened quietly to the Parson's talk. The old Range Tramp was quite well posted on the Bible, and as he listened, his suspicions increased.

Finally Roy declared that it was time to "turn in." It fell to Jolly Jack to act as guard the first part of the night, and Roy found an opportunity to tell him of Dismal's suspicions. Jack promised to keep wide awake, and look out for "snags."

Keeping guard was not a pleasant duty, and Jack heartily wished that the Parson was in Tophet long before the moon got high enough to pour a portion of its light down into Wind Canyon. After a time the young miner became fearfully sleepy, and threw himself down in

front of the tent. He did not mean to fall asleep, but fall asleep he did.

Just what aroused him he never could tell, but he suddenly found himself wide awake. He did not change the position of his body, but he glanced around to discover that the moon had risen higher in the heavens, and was sending a glorious flood of light down into the canyon. The moonlight showed him something that made his heart leap into his mouth.

Standing in the moonlight, not twenty feet away, was the very girl whom he had seen once before. She was standing perfectly motionless, and seemed to be regarding him intently. Jack noticed that her clothes, though far from being of a fashionable cut, hung around her perfect form in a manner which appeared to lend it added grace—if such a thing were possible. But that was as far as his observation went in that line, for her face was more attractive.

Jack had spoken truly when he said that she was beautiful. Her dark, handsome face was worthy the best effort of a skilled artist's brush. Her long hair was tied back from her face, but flowed loosely down her back, adding a wild charm to her beauty.

But the young miner was not given much time to feast his eyes on her strange loveliness, for she appeared to suddenly become aware that he was not asleep. With a smooth, gliding movement, she turned and retreated from the spot. In hot haste, Jack sprung up and followed.

"By gracious! she is not going to give me the slip very easy!" muttered the excited young man.

Noticing that she was pursued, the strange girl became—or appeared to become—alarmed, and moved forward faster. Jack also quickened his steps, little thinking what he was doing.

Suddenly the girl stopped and motioned him back. Involuntarily Jack paused. The girl was standing directly beneath a huge projecting cliff, which threw a deep shadow down the perpendicular wall till it nearly touched her dark hair.

She again waved her hand toward her pursuer, seemingly in a warning manner. An instant later she arose steadily and slowly into the air, apparently going upward without any effort of her own.

The watcher gave a gasp of amazement. With her dark eyes fastened upon him, the beautiful unknown went steadily upward till she was swallowed up by the black shadow of the cliff.

CHAPTER VII.

THE VOICE OF A FOE.

DOWN across the plains through the darkness thundered the little party of trailers, following the guide, Nebraska Nat, and heading straight for the red flames which told them that the attacking red-skins were wreaking terrible havoc with the train. The beat of their horses' hoofs drowned whatever sounds of the conflict that would have otherwise reached them.

"Cum on, 'Bijah!" shrilly piped Old Hasty, as he urged his horse to the limit of the animal's exertion. "Don't try ter back out now, if you are frightened!"

"Who's frightened?" bellowed 'Bijah, as he thrashed the sides of his horse with his long legs. "Ther man w'at sez so is a liar by the clock! It's this hyer infernal hoss! Thar hain't er durned bit o' life lef' in ther critter."

"Thet's right! lay it ter ther boss!" sneered the '49er. "Stop holdin' ther critter back an' you'll git thar with ther rest o' ther crowd."

"Great heavens! I fear we shall all be too late!" groaned Martin Holmes, as he strained his eyes toward the spot where the flames were leaping toward the sky.

Nebraska Nat said not a word, but kept his eyes straight ahead, and his ears strained to catch any sound that might be heard above the beat of many hoofs.

"Hope we'll git thar in time ter take a han' in ther wind-up o' ther game," exclaimed Old Hasty. "We'll make 'em think er cyclone has struck 'em."

For an instant Nebraska Nat turned his head long enough to fling back over his shoulder:

"The chances are that the work will be over before we can take a hand. The poor devils have been surprised, and it is probably a wholesale slaughter. Curse the red fiends!"

And in their hearts all of his hearers echoed his fierce words.

"Blame ther luck! W'y c'u'dn't I hev bin thar with ther train when ther varmintssnooped down on 'em!" whined Old Hasty.

"Ther good Lawd only knows," was 'Bijah Bigfist's instant retort. "Ef you only had! Ther chances are thet thar won't enny o' ther pore devils git erway, an' ef you'd bin thar we'd got shut o' ye fer good an' all. I dunno w'y Fate sh'u'd be so crooel ter us."

"Gentlemen," came sternly from Martin Holmes's lips, "this is no time for levity."

"You're jest rite," 'Bijah agreed; "but it seems ter be ther season fer red-skins."

"Think of those poor women," gritted Holmes. "But even their fate may be more merciful than that which befalls my dear child!"

This silenced both 'Bijah and the old '49er.

They could joke in the face of the most deadly danger that might menace themselves, but at the mention of a woman's danger their hearts were touched and their lips dumb.

On over the prairie dashed the little band, drawing nearer and nearer to the imperiled train.

"Have your guns ready for use," commanded the guide.

At last they reached the crest of a swell in the plain, and a startling sight was revealed to them.

"Great God!" groaned Nebraska Nat; "we are too late!"

He spoke the truth. From their position, where they had instinctively drawn rein of one accord, they could see that the train was already in the hands of the red demons. Every wagon was in flames, and back and forth among them the Indians were darting, some mounted and some on foot. The triumphant yells of the merciless wretches were something dreadful to hear. Now and then they would fire a shot, but it seemed that the entire band of emigrants had been slaughtered before the trailers came in view of the train.

"It is all over!" said Nat, solemnly. "We cannot aid our friends, for they are past aid."

"Wal, we kin avenge them," gritted Old Hasty. "Cum' on!"

"Stop!" commanded Nat, sharply. "Don't be a fool, old man! It would be worse than madness to rush in there now. It would be suicide!"

"Let him go," advised Big 'Bijah. "He won't be missed."

The party held a hurried consultation and decided that to attack the triumphant reds would indeed be folly. Should they do so, the chances were that not one of them would live to tell the story. Revenge would be sweet, but life was sweeter. It happened that not one of the trailers had lost a very near or dear friend in the massacre, and therefore it is probable they were not quite so willing to sacrifice their own lives for vengeance as they might have been under other circumstances.

"W'at's ter be did?" demanded the old '49er. "I can't set hyer an' see them red devils howlin' round! It makes my blood boil!"

"I wonder what they have done with the poor women?" asked one of the men.

"They have met the same fate that the others did," replied the guide, sadly. "These fiends do not respect the fair sex."

"Unless it happens to be a beautiful girl," put in another. "Then her fate is worse than that of those who are killed at once."

Sitting in the darkness, the little party watched the complete destruction of the train. After a time the Indians, of whom there were nearly a hundred, moved away, leaving the wagons still burning. Like evil shadows of the night, they vanished into the darkness, going toward the Hills.

For more than an hour the little party of whites sat there in the darkness, watching the flames sink lower and lower until nothing but a mass of glowing coals was left of the white-topped wagons which they had left a few short hours ago. Finally, Old Hasty exclaimed:

"Thar, I can't stan' this enny longer! I'm goin' ter look over ther roofs."

"I'm with ye, pard," said 'Bijah Bigfist, promptly.

"We will all go forward, now," was Nebraska Nat's decision. "The reds must be far away."

In a short space of time they reached the spot where the massacre had occurred. Here and there were little mounds of red coals, all that was left of the wagons. By the dull light from these embers a sight was revealed that is too terrible for description. One by one, they examined the fire-scorched bodies of their late comrades, but in every case they found that life was extinct. The murderous reds had thrown the bodies of the unfortunate emigrants upon the burning wagons, and in many cases nothing but a mass of charred bones remained.

"Let's get away from hyer!" panted Bigfist, his face deathly white. "I am sick at heart!"

"And I feel jest like goin' gunnin' fer red-skins," gritted fiery little Old Hasty. "Ther durned varmint's orter be 'nihilated offen ther face o' ther 'arth!"

"Which way shall we move, guide?" asked Martin Holmes.

"Toward the Hills," was Nat's prompt reply.

A few minutes later the little party rode away from the scene of the deadly struggle, heading for the Hills.

The night was well spent when seven haggard, weary-appearing men halted in a little defile on the outskirts of the Black Hills.

"We will pass the remainder of the night here," Nat announced.

In a remarkably brief space of time the men had picketed their horses and, regardless of danger, thrown themselves down to rest.

The moon which had risen two hours before midnight, was well over into the western sky.

"Thank Heaven for a chance to rest!" sighed one of the party. "I am 'most dead."

"You should thank Heaven that you are not

quite dead, as you would have been had you been with the train," said a companion.

"Look there!"

The cry burst from Martin Holmes's lips, and with one hand he pointed upward. Every man glanced up, and far above them, plainly revealed by the moonlight, they saw a man standing on a point of rocks. As they looked, he lifted his right hand above his head and cried in a clear voice:

"Again we meet, Martin Holmes! You have felt the power of my vengeance, but my work is not yet complete! There are things harder to bear than death! Ha! ha! ha!"

Then the figure gave an agile spring and disappeared.

For a moment Martin Holmes seemed stricken speechless; then he leaped to his feet, fairly shrieking:

"God above! that was the form and voice of Argus Damon, my most deadly foe!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STORY OF A VILLAIN'S VENGEANCE.

IN an instant every man of the little party was on his feet, weapons in hand. Holmes had also sprung up, but for a moment he swayed as if about to fall. 'Bijah Bigfist caught hold of his arm, saying sharply:

"Brace up, Holmes, an' give us ther p'int's. Who was thet thar critter anyhow?"

"A villain!—a human fiend!—a kidnapper and murderer!" gasped the excited man.

"Thet's w'at we wants ter know. Say, guide, hain't thar no way ter git up ter that p'int?"

"Possibly; but that man will be a mile away before we can reach it."

"Show me the way!" cried Holmes, a revolver gleaming in his hand. "Show me the way! I will have that wretch's heart's blood!"

"I'm with ye, man," declared Old Hasty, who was always ready for any excitement.

"You had better go a little slow, pards," cautioned Nebraska Nat. "If that fellow should take a notion, he could hold that point against our whole crowd. You may run your heads against a large sized snag up there."

"Thanks, muchly," from the '49er. "If we choose to go, it is our funeral. We don't ask you to come unless ye wish ter."

"I have given you my advice; take it or leave it, I don't care a fig."

"All rite," laughed the little Californian. "If Holmes sez go up, go up it is."

"An' you kin count me inter ther crowd," added Big 'Bijah, much to the surprise of the entire party. "I shell hev ter go along an' see thet Ole Quickness don't git hurt."

"Enny more?" asked Hasty, peering sharply at the others.

The men seemed to hesitate.

"You have crowd enough to go on such a wild-goose chase," said Nat. "The men are tired and need rest. If you fellows want a little more exercise, go ahead."

"Yes, let's be movin'," urged 'Bijah. "Thet feller will hev time ter git clean ercross ther Contynent afore we git started."

Martin Holmes had already made a start, and the two Californians hastened to put themselves beside him. As they started, Nat threw after them:

"If you bring the stranger into camp, just wake me and tell me how you did it. Five to one you don't set eyes on him again to-night."

"Just my idea," muttered 'Bijah, loud enough for Old Hasty to hear; "but it struck me thet sumbuddy better go along with Holmes ter see thet ther critter don't down him, fer he w'u'd hev er good chance fer sech dirty work."

"You are right, and I am glad you come. I was a leetle too quick—as I allus am—w'en I volyenteered ter go with him; but arter thet I w'u'dn't take back water. Ef we'd gone fer Holmes heavy we might hev made him staid whar he was."

They soon discovered that it was far from an easy thing to reach the point of rocks where the stranger had stood, but, with Old Hasty leading, they toiled steadily upward. Holmes followed the little '49er and 'Bijah brought up the rear.

"If you spot the devil, let me get at him first," panted Holmes, nearly winded from the climb.

"He won't be thar," declared Old Hasty, confidently. "Ef he was, we'd 'a' heerd frum him afore this. He'd never let us git up without tryin' ter perforate our hides."

"I thought he was dead," Holmes managed to utter. "It was reported that he died in South America. But now he turns up alive and still after vengeance. Vengeance! Great Heaven! As if he had not had vengeance enough!"

"An ole score?" ventured 'Bijah.

"Yes. He is a man of terrible passions, yet I once called him friend! He was a snake in the grass! I would have trusted him with my life. I did trust him, and when I least dreamed of such a thing, he proved false. Curse him!"

He stopped speaking for want of breath, but not for lack of interest on the part of his listeners. Both 'Bijah and Old Hasty were curious to know the strange story which they felt

sure that their companion could tell; but they were too wise to display an eagerness to hear the tale. Besides that, the time or place was not suited for talk.

They finally reached the point of rocks where the strange man had stood. The moonlight showed them rocks, shrubs and shadows, but, save themselves, not a living thing was in view. Away to the north lay the broken land of the Black Hills, with the white light bathing the peaks and making black blot and streaks where were the canyons and passes. Behind them was the open plain, where miles away, in the darkness of early night, a terrible and bloody tragedy had occurred. Below lay the dark valley they had recently left, where, although they could not see them, they knew their companions were sleeping.

For several seconds the three stood quite still, strangely impressed by the grandeur of what they saw. It is uncertain which of them would have broken the silence—the awful, impressive silence which brooded over the moonlight-flooded land—had not the distant mournful howl of a wolf served to do so.

"What's our man?" spoke 'Bijah, yet not venturing to raise his voice much above a whisper.

"What I thort he'd be—gone," said Old Hasty. "Ther durned critter made tracks as soon as he finished spoutin'."

But Holmes was not so ready to give up the hunt.

"He may be near. Let us look around."

"'Twon't do no hurt, ef it don't do no good," muttered 'Bijah. "We may as well humor 'im, pard."

And so they did their best to find the man whom they had seen standing near that spot; but, as the two Californians had thought, not a sign of the stranger was to be found. They were finally forced to give up the hunt.

"He has escaped again!" groaned Martin Holmes. "Will Heaven suffer him to remain forever unpunished?"

"Oh, he'll reach ther eend o' his string by an' by," said 'Bijah, encouragingly. "Sech critters allus do."

With a sigh, Holmes sunk down on the ground.

"I hope I may have a chance to speak with him before he meets his just deserts," he murmured. "There is one thing that he can tell me that I would give worlds to know."

At a motion from Old Hasty, 'Bijah threw himself on the ground, as also did the old '49er. Hasty thought that Holmes might be in a talking mood, and he was right. The sight of his foe had driven all thoughts of sleep from the wretched man's mind, and now, although fatigued by the climb, he was as wide-awake as ever.

"A treacherous frien's erbout the wu'st critter unbung," ventured the little Californian, not thinking it policy to seem too inquisitive.

"You are right, and Argus Damon proved to be the most treacherous creature imaginable. That was years ago, when we were both young men, but his dastardly vengeance wrecked my life in a measure. Had it not been for my darling child I know not to what desperate act I might have been driven. I have lived for her—for her alone! And now, merciful God! she is lost to me!"

The strong man's anguish was painful to witness, and 'Bijah hastened to say:

"We'll restore Leetle Blue Eyes ter ye safe an' soun' ur use up ther rest o' our lives in tryin'!"

The big-hearted fellow's words touched Holmes, and he said with deep feeling:

"You are very kind, but I fear that you may find the task much more difficult than you imagine. Something tells me that my dear girl is in that villain's hands. If so, Heaven have mercy on her, for he will not!"

"Oh, it may not be so bad as that. Ther Parson was ther one as kerried of ther gal, and this hyer foe o' yourn c'u'dn't hev bin ther Parson. You would have seen through sech a trick, fer you met ther Parson every day."

"No, the Parson was not Argus Damon in disguise; he could not have deceived me in that way. At the same time, Parson Perkins may have been in league with my enemy."

"Ef so, it kinder looks like this ole foe is connected with ther Hawks o' ther Black Hills in some way," Old Hasty observed. "Fer it are plain as day thet ther kidnappin' o' ther gal was ther work o' ther Hawks."

"And that makes me feel that the chances of rescuing her are few, indeed. From what I have heard, I should judge that these outlaws who are known as the Hawks are a very powerful and desperate band of murderous marauders."

The little '49er was forced to confess that this was true, and for a moment silence fell over the three. At last Holmes said:

"If you care to listen, I will tell you of Argus Damon's treachery."

That was just what Old Hasty had been wishing for, and he hastened to assure the unfortunate parent that he was perfectly willing to listen. Big 'Bijah said not a word, but both of his ears were wide open.

Holmes commenced:

"My friendship with Argus Damon began before I met Zora Doyle, in fact, I met the beautiful girl less than two months after he saved me five thousand dollars by giving me some pointers concerning a certain speculation that I was about to invest in, thus preventing me from doing so. At that time Damon was in the South, but a strong friendship had existed between us since we first met, and we were corresponding when I became acquainted with Zora. Although, up to that time, I had scoffed at such a thing as love at first sight, I must confess that I fell in love with Zora the moment my eyes rested on her sweet face for the first time. Of course I told Damon of this in the very first letter I wrote afterward.

"Looking back from my present position, it seems very strange that we should have become so intimate in so short a time, for there was not one other of my friends that I would have unbosomed myself to, and yet I had known many of them from boyhood, while Argus Damon had been a stranger to me a few weeks before. But persons do unaccountable things sometimes. I am almost convinced that Damon had done his best to obtain an influence over me, and succeeded.

"He wrote me a long letter, cautioning me against undue haste in so serious a matter, for I had even hinted that I was ready to marry Zora the moment she would have me. But I paid little heed to his warning, for to my delight I soon discovered that, like myself, Zora was in love. My delight on finding that the object of her admiration was myself can best be imagined. I was in the seventh Heaven of ecstasy.

"Zora was a shop-girl, working for her bread in a great city; I was a young man of moderate wealth, alone in the world so far as near relatives went, and not caring a fig for that world's opinion. My delight on discovering that Zora was also without near relatives and forced to battle for bread, was unlimited; but I resolved not to leave her in that position for a great while, if I could have my way.

"I will not dwell on the minor points of our days of happiness before we were married, nor tell how difficult I found the task of inducing her to consent to marry me, even after she had confessed that she loved me better than all the world. She feared that I might think she was after what little wealth I possessed, and that my love for her might prove nothing but a passing fancy. But at last I prevailed, and Argus Damon got back from the South just in time to act as best man at the wedding.

"I will not attempt to tell how happy we were; it is the same old story of every young couple. In accordance with Zora's wishes, we leased a little cottage in the suburbs and 'set up housekeeping.' It did not take me long to discover that my little wife was a neat and tasty housekeeper, and the pleasure of living became something greater than I had ever dreamed.

"Damon visited our home often, and after a time he and Zora became quite friendly, although at first she had disliked him. I have often wondered if he did not exercise some strange fascination over her, as I am quite sure he did over me. He was a very peculiar man, but I never dreamed how vindictive and cruel he was till I saw him punish a poor horse which had been frightened, and ran with him. I thought he meant to kill the animal, for he ceased to beat it only when I interfered in the beast's behalf.

"But the time had not come for my blinded eyes to be opened to Argus Damon's perfidy. It came when least expected, for I had not a thought that he would dare make the attempt he did, even if he wished to. But the man was devoid of fear or conscience.

"As I have said, he and Zora were very friendly, and when business called me out of the city for a week, I left her in his charge. I was a fool! I can see that plain enough now. But I trusted Zora perfectly, and I never dreamed that Damon would resort to desperate measures to accomplish a wicked purpose.

"Fate called me back to the city sooner than I had thought of returning. A late train brought me in, and I hurried home afoot, thinking how I would surprise my dear little wife. I went up the walk to the back door and let myself in with a key I carried. Barely had the door closed behind me when a stifled cry for help came to my ears. I recognized my wife's voice, and like a madman flew to her aid. I shall never forget the sight which greeted my eyes.

"My wife was struggling in the hands of my false friend, and his hand was on her throat. For an instant I could not believe my eyes. Then, when I saw that he was overpowering her, I hurled myself upon him, fairly wild with fury. The slight noise which the struggle had made prevented him from hearing me, and he knew nothing of my presence till I seized him. With the strength of a Samson, I hurled him to the floor, and at that instant I fully intended to kill him then and there. A thousand times since then I have wished that I had accomplished my purpose. Three times I kicked him with all the force I could master. If I had possessed a weapon, I should have shot him dead.

Not a word or a cry came from his lips as he felt my booted foot, but I shall never forget the look on his face.

"The woman whom he had so brutally attacked saved him from further punishment. Seizing hold of me, she entreated me not to kill him, for she saw the deadly light in my eyes. She pulled me away when I would have driven my booted foot into his handsome, evil face. She saved him from further punishment, but I dragged him to the door and kicked him out into the street.

"Argus Damon came near dying from the effects of the punishment he received at my hands, but he did not tell a soul how he came by his injuries. He kept the secret to himself and swore vengeance. When Zora had treated his advances with scorn, he had sought to gain his evil ends by force, but I appeared when least expected, just in time to baffle his foul game.

"When my false friend was able to get around, he came to the very cottage from the door of which I had kicked him, and, standing in that same doorway, swore a terrible oath to have a bitter revenge—to wring my heart to the core for every kick I had bestowed upon him. Then he went away and we heard nothing of him for nearly three years.

"During that time twin children—a boy and girl—came to our home. How happy we were! The memory of Argus Damon seemed like a black shadow we would fain have forgotten. We fondly hoped that he had passed out of our lives forever. Vain hope! The dastard lived and remembered his vow, as we were soon to learn to our sorrow.

"One day little Rolf, our baby boy, was kidnapped. The act was done in broad daylight, the child being taken from where he was sleeping, near an open window. A note was found explaining his disappearance. It told us that he was in the hands of our false friend, then our deadly foe.

"I will not attempt to describe everything that followed. To do so would make my story too long, and I must cut it short, if you gentlemen wish to get any sleep to-night. Of course I put detectives on the trail. I did everything possible for his recovery, all to no avail. When all my efforts had failed, we received a letter from Argus Damon—a terrible, taunting letter—saying that our child should be brought up among the vilest of the vile and should be made as low as evil teaching could make him. More than anything else I think that letter served to break Zora down. She should not have seen it, but in some way it came into her hands first. Within four months, my darling was dead!"

For an instant Martin Holmes paused, as if overcome by the bitter memory. Neither of his companions spoke, but Old Hasty was plainly heard to grate his teeth, and something strangely like a smothered sob came from the spot where 'Bijah was reclining with his face in the shadow.

"I cannot dwell on the agony that I endured," continued Martin Holmes. "It seemed that I should die; I hoped that I might! But I did not; I lived to take up the hunt once more. Little Hattie was placed in the care of a kind, motherly old lady, and I went out into the world to hunt for my boy—and Argus Damon! I found neither, but years after proof came that my foe—the kidnapper of my child and murderer of my wife—had died in South America. This I believed till I saw him near this spot a short time ago.

"This, gentlemen, is my story. You will now understand why I always seem so grave and mirthless. There is a great shadow—a terrible sorrow that haunts me always—blotting all the sunshine out of my life. No, that is not right. All the sunshine has not been blotted out, for Hattie was left to me, and she resembles a sunbeam more than anything else. But now—God pity me!—she, too, is gone, and I fear she has fallen into the hands of that vilest of wretches, Argus Damon."

CHAPTER IX.

THE STRUGGLE ON THE CLIFF.

TEN minutes after Martin Holmes finished telling his story the three men descended into the valley where they knew the shadows hid their sleeping comrades. Both Old Hasty and 'Bijah had said very little when Holmes ceased speaking, for they knew not what to say. Their curiosity had been satisfied by hearing the strange tale of a villain's vengeance, but they felt as if they had been shown the contents of a private closet, into which it was almost a crime to peep.

Their silence was more acceptable to the wronged man than words could have been. It was not often that he opened his heart to any one, and it seemed strange to him that he had chosen two strangers as confidants. He had plainly seen that his story had affected both of the old miners, and their silent sympathy was all he desired.

Down in the ravine they found the men sleeping soundly, with Nebraska Nat acting as guard. The guide seemed built of iron and capable of enduring any amount of fatiguing duty. He was looking for them, but said not a word as they came down the slope. They flung themselves down, and exhausted nature

soon asserted herself; sleep closed their eyes and stole away their sense of fatigue.

The moon sunk silently toward the western peaks; the night wore away and morning came.

The tired men slept later than they would have done but for the terrible work of the day before. Old Hasty was the first astir, and he soon aroused his comrades.

"What's ther guide?" was his question.

But he knew as well as his comrades. The guide was not to be seen.

"Guess he has taken a walk," said Old Hasty, grimly; "but w'at fer an' where gone?"

"I was to have taken his place as guard and give him a chance to rest near morning," spoke one of the men. "But he did not call me, and I slept right through."

The '49er shook his head slowly and with a puzzled air.

"Kinder quare," he muttered. "Nat ort ter be hyer."

"Perhaps he will turn up afore long," ventured Big 'Bijah. "He may have gone ter look at ther lay o' ther lan'."

But this explanation did not satisfy Old Hasty, although the little Californian did not say much more just then.

"As fer me, I'm almighty hongry," one of the party declared, and half a dozen echoed his words.

After a sober consultation, it was decided that two of the party should see what they could do about securing game of some kind, and the two Californians were the ones chosen as most likely to succeed in such an attempt. Arrangements were soon made. The remainder of the party were to remain where they were while 'Bijah and Hasty were on the search for something which would provide them with a breakfast.

"We will bring back something and not be long about it," promised 'Bijah.

Then the two strange California pards left the little party, each carrying a rifle.

Less than half an hour passed before those left behind heard the sound of two distant shots.

"Our friends have found game," said one.

"Or red-skins," laughed another.

"It is all the same," the first declared.

It was not long before the two hunters returned carrying a young deer, or fawn, between them.

"We won't starve," laughed 'Bijah.

"But how are we to cook the meat?" asked Martin Holmes. "A fire will be pretty sure to draw to this spot the red murderers of our friends, who are in this vicinity, for the smoke will be seen."

"We've got ter took our chances. I'd rayther die fightin' than ter starve."

"We'll see erbout ther smoke," said Old Hasty. "Sum o' you galoots get ther critter ready fer cookin' an' I'll scrape ther wood tergether."

Ten minutes later the little Californian had started the fire, and as he had taken care to gather nothing but dry wood, very little smoke was made.

Salt was something that Old Hasty was seldom without, and therefore the party were not obliged to eat unseasoned meat. The steak was delicious, and the half-starved men enjoyed that breakfast as much as any they had ever eaten. When it was finished, they lay on the ground and discussed the situation.

Holmes was impatient to be moving, and confessed himself at a loss to decide which way to move. Now that they were without their guide, the entire party seemed at a loss to decide which was the proper course to pursue. The strange disappearance of Nebraska Nat was a mystery to them, and the more they thought and talked of it the more puzzled they became.

It was finally decided to move from the spot, leaving a message behind that would inform the missing man why and where they had gone. That is, it would tell him where they had gone as well as they themselves could tell at that time.

When all this was arranged and they had taken enough of the meat to last them for a day or more, they mounted their horses and rode up the little ravine. Leaving this at the earliest opportunity, they plunged into the deeper recesses of the wild Gold Hills.

Old Hasty rode beside Martin Holmes and conversed freely with him. But a most surprising thing was the unusual reticence of the little Californian's big pard. 'Bijah was not in a talking mood just then.

"If your surmial that Hattie is in the hands o' ther Hawks o' ther Gold Hills is right," said the old '49er to Holmes, "we are pursuin' ther best possible course, fer the den o' ther varmints is sumw'ares in ther heart o' ther Hills, an' she was probably taken thar."

"I have thought of that," Holmes confessed. "But there is little chance of our finding their retreat after the people of the Hills, on whom they prey, have failed."

Inwardly the '49er was forced to confess that this was quite true, but he would not let the man who rode beside him know that he considered the case so desperate. With an attempt at encouragement, he said:

"Ye'r er leetle orf in supposin' thet ther

Hawks prey mostly on ther people o' ther Hills. It's ther emmygrants w'at are cumin' inter ther Hills as suffer ther most, I'll bet er hoss."

"You may be right."

"I am sure thet I am. Ther people o' ther Hills are too busy ter go gunnin' fer Hawks. They are lookin' fer yaller, an' every man calkerlates thet he's goin' ter make er forbune. He reckons as how it'd be er fool trick fer him ter waste time huntin' fer outlaws."

"And so the Hawks carry on their foul work unmolested?"

"Reckon thet's erbout ther size o' it. An' you bet yer boots it'll be er right smart time afore ther gold-seekers o' ther Black Hills stop long ernuff ter poke their noses inter ther outlaws' fairs."

"It is outrageous that such things are done in our civilized country."

"Thet's er fac', pard; but they are, you bet. I've seen plenty o' sech dirty work in my day, an' am not ershamed in sayin' thet I've had er han' in givin' more'n one hoss-thief an' cut-throat his dues."

"Lynch law?"

"Not allus, though mostly."

"Usually a poor way to punish crime."

"In most cases, yes; but thar are siterwations thet deman' desp'rit remedies, so ter speak. Ef it hadn't bin fer Jedge Lynch an' ther Vigilantes an' bones' man c'u'dn't 'a' lived in ther ole days in Callyforny. Mind you, I don't say ez how Jedge Lynch never made no mistakes, an' I know thet ther Vigilantes turned inter a mess o' durned pirates in ther en', but I'll stick by it thet they dun more ter clean ther cussidness out er Callyforny then all ther law an' jestic, dealt out by ther courts, c'u'd 'a' dun."

"You may be right."

"I'm bettin' thet ef these Hawks are gi'n w'at they desurve it'll be lynchin' ez duz it. They are ez bad a set o' pirates ez enny that Callyforny ever saw, an' tw'u'dn't s'prise me ef they was in cahoots with ther red devils w'at wiped out ther train las' nite."

Holmes started.

"What makes you think that?" he asked, quickly.

"I didn't say thet 'I did think it, did I?' returned the old '49er. "I sed that it w'u'dn't s'prise me, an' it w'u'dn't. Things look thet way. Fu'st, ther gal was kerried orf. Ef they wanted ter save her frum the massycree thet was er mighty good way ter do it. Then ther reds kem down on ther train an' wiped out ther hull outfit. In course they kerried away everthin' of value, an' p'r'aps part—if not ther hull—o' ther stuff is in ther Hawks' Den now."

"Which means?"

"Thet a part o' ther Injuns may hev bin white outlaws in paint."

The old man's words set Holmes to thinking, and for a long time the entire party rode along in silence.

Suddenly a cry from Bigfist startled them all.

"Look thar!" he shouted.

The eyes of every man followed the big Californian's pointing finger, and far above them, on the very verge of a perpendicular cliff they saw two struggling forms—a white man and a red-skin!

The white looked like a very old man, for his hair and beard were almost snowy-white, falling low down on shoulders and breast. His head was uncovered, and, with his white hair and beard, he looked as one might imagine one of the aged prophets of Bible times appeared. He was dressed in a strange mixture of woollen clothes and the skins of animals, and not a weapon was visible about his person.

The Indian was a young warrior in the very prime of manly vigor. He seemed to have sprung on the white and clutched him from behind with the intention of hurling him over the cliff. But he had misjudged his man, for, old though he appeared, the pale-face had lost not a bit of his youthful strength. Indeed, the strange white man was a modern Samson.

With breathless interest, the little party of whites watched the terrific struggle far above them. For a time it seemed that the red would succeed in his deadly purpose and that the white-haired pale-face would meet his death on the rocks at the foot of the cliff.

"Jove!" gasped Big 'Bijah. "He's er goner. Can't we do suthin' ter help him?"

"W'at yer goin' ter do?" demanded Old Hasty.

"Shoot ther durned red skunk!" was the quick answer.

"P'r'aps you'd better try it, 'Bijah!" said the little '49er, sarcastically. "Ther rest o' us 'd be ez ap' ter hit ther white ez ther red."

His words were true. The distance and the rapid movements of the contending foes made it impossible for one of them to fire at the Indian and not stand an even chance of sending the lead into the white man.

"See!"

The exclamation came from the lips of one of the spectators of the battle on the cliff.

In some strange manner the white man had obtained a hold on his dark enemy and drawn him round so that they were on nearly equal terms.

Then a most astonishing thing occurred.

The pale-face grasped his foe, and, a moment later, the Indian was held above that white head by two arms which did not quiver in the least—held poised above that dreadful fall!

Then in a deep, thrilling voice the strange, wild-looking victor cried:

"Down, you red fiend—down to death!"

A human body shot through the air, a terrible shriek rung in the ears of the fascinated watchers, a sickening thud followed, and the Indian lay dead on the rocks at the foot of the cliff!

"Hal hal ha!"

It was a blood-chilling laugh that burst from the lips of the survivor on the brink far above. An instant later he was gone.

Then Martin Holmes cried, hoarse with emotion:

"That voice!—that face! Am I dreaming, or has the dead returned to life?"

CHAPTER X.

AN UNKNOWN TO THE RESCUE.

HATTIE HOLMES never could remember very distinctly what occurred on the night that she was kidnapped from the train. In her dreams she had fancied that she was suffocating, and the terrible sensation continued when she awoke. She seemed held fast in an iron grip, a cloth was pressed over her mouth and nose, and a terrible sickening smell made her senses reel. She tried to cry out, but found that she could not. Strange visions floated before her eyes, strange music sounded in her ears, and then she knew no more for a time.

It seemed a long time after that that she fancied she was floating through the air. But she soon became aware that she was being carried in the arms of some one. The steady tramp of horses' hoofs told her that she was in the midst of a mounted party. Then a great terror seized upon her and again she became unconscious.

Perhaps half an hour passed and then a faint, fluttering sigh welled from her lips. The person who held her in his arms heard it and said:

"She's coming round, Lieutenant Claw."

"Good enough," was the instant response. "We are beyond earshot of the train and it is time that she recovered from the effect of the drug."

Hattie heard these words, and realized how terrible her position was. She struggled to speak, but for a time her tongue seemed held motionless by an iron chain.

On went the midnight kidnappers—on across the moonlit plain.

By and by the voice of Lieutenant Claw was heard:

"Jasper, you and Hawkeye prepare your horses' feet with the trail-hiding muffers and strike direct for the Den, carrying the girl with you. Be careful to leave the trail just where pursuers will be the least liable to discover the trick. We will go on and make a trail for them to follow."

Then the two men addressed—one of whom held the kidnapped girl in his arms—stopped their horses and the rest of the Gold Hawks swept on.

At this moment Hattie spoke for the first time since she had fallen into the hands of the Black Hills desperadoes:

"Villains, where are you taking me?" she demanded.

One of the men laughed; the other remained silent.

"We are taking you to a place of safety," said the laughter.

"To a place of safety," sneered the girl, with sudden energy. "Ruffians—robbers, release me!"

Again the man laughed.

"Not so fast, pretty bird," he sneered. "The captain wants you, and when he wants a thing he usually gets it, you can bet."

"Even ef he has ter jine an emmygrant train an' act er part," put in the one who had not spoken thus far.

"There!" burst from the lips of the other.

"Dry up, Hawkeye! You can see better than you can talk, and you never ebin without making a mess of it. It is well that the captain did not hear you say that."

"And you are ther champion galoot fer findin' fault," snapped the man addressed.

But at this instant a diversion occurred. Inspired by despair, Hattie broke from the arms of her captor and flung herself from the horse. But Hawkeye was on the ground before her and he seized her the moment she touched the grass.

"Slow an' easy, little sweetness!" he said, grimly. "I w'u'dn't hurry ter leave us, fer we can't spar' yer camp'ny."

Wildly she struggled to break from his grasp, but he held her easily.

"No use, my dear; you can't go. We have got yer an' we're goin' ter obey orders by takin' ye ther Den."

"Hyar, Jasper, take her back, an' hev er care not ter let her slip ye erg'in. Ef I can't talk ter suit you, I kin ketch sum things thet you are too weak ter hole onter. Keep yer grip, now, pard."

Then Hawkeye swung the girl up to the man who had listened to this rebuke in silence.

"I'll putt on ther trail-hiders," said he of the sharp eyes. "You hang ter ther prize."

But Hattie did not hear his words. The poor girl had lost consciousness again.

Once more the two Hawks and their unconscious prey went on toward the Black Hills. To the unfortunate girl the rest of that journey was much like a fitful dream. She did not know how the two men urged their horses till the poor animals were ready to drop, nor did she know when they left the open plains for the Hills; but when she was conscious once more she saw frowning walls on either hand and discovered that it was morning.

On into the Hills pushed the two outlaws, only halting once for Jasper to again take the girl when Hawkeye—who had carried her for some time—became tired.

The sun had crept over into the western sky when they entered a part of the Hills that for wild and barren grandeur is something awful to contemplate. A more uninviting section it would be hard to discover beyond the boundaries of the weird Bad Lands.

But the two tireless Hawks did not pause. Onward they pressed as if quite familiar with the country. Up and down, through dark cuts and barren defiles, without halting they went. Finally they ascended a narrow and gloomy seam that looked like a crack in the side of a great hill. Far up they came to the mouth of a cave, but not till they had passed a guard.

Without hesitation, the outlaws rode their horses straight into the dark opening. They seemed to know their surroundings perfectly, for they went straight on into the utter darkness till a light suddenly flashed before their eyes and a hoarse voice greeted them.

Hawkeye sprung down and Jasper passed him the captive maiden.

"We are back again, Disco, said Jasper, as he left the horse's back; "and every bone in my body is sore. It has been killing work for the horses as well. Give the poor beasts your best attention, old man."

The man with the light growled out some reply, but neither Jasper or Hawkeye paid the least heed to his words. Between them they carried the captive girl on into the darkness.

Hattie was conscious, but neither of the two desperadoes knew it. She had seemed conscious only at times, and the followers of Captain Hawk had not taken the precaution to blindfold her, for they fancied that she took no note of her surroundings.

The footsteps of the two Hawks echoed along the dark passage, but neither spoke till they came to a little chamber where a lamp that shed a dim light hung suspended from the rocky ceiling. There they paused.

"Hawkeye," said Jasper, "take the girl to the guests' chamber. I will see that food is prepared for ourselves and for her."

Then Hattie was carried out of the lighted chamber in Hawkeye's strong arms.

The "guests' chamber" proved to be a much more comfortable place than one would naturally have expected there, and the captive girl was really glad when she found herself reclining on a comfortable couch.

"This hyer is your own private apartment," Hawkeye said, as he lighted a lamp which hung near the center of the chamber. "You shell be treated well an' may as well make yerself easy tell ther cap'n cums. You shell hev sum hash putty soon."

Then he paused as if for an answer; but he got none.

"A guard will be putt just er leetle ways out thar," he continued, when he found that she did not speak. "It will be time wasted if ye tries ter 'scape, fer he'll be on ther watch. Even ef thar wassen't no guard putt out thar, ye c'u'dn't pass them at ther mouth of ther cave, so ye may as well took it easy as ter try ter git out."

Once more he paused, and, if he expected an answer, he was again disappointed. As he turned to leave the chamber, he muttered to himself:

"By Jove! she is a beauty! I don't wonder thet ther cap'n wanted ter save her frum ther wreck."

A moment later Hattie saw Hawkeye's back disappear behind the curtains which hung before the mouth of the chamber, and she knew that she was alone.

Shortly after food was brought her. She forced herself to eat a little.

When the remnants were carried away, and she knew that she was again alone, she lay back on the couch and wept herself to sleep.

When she awoke she felt much refreshed, but for a time she could not remember where she was. Then everything came back to her, and for a moment she was overcome by the horror that she felt.

After awhile she arose and examined the room or chamber in which she was confined. She found solid rock walls on three sides, and the curtains which hid the entrance on the other. She lifted the curtain and saw nothing but darkness beyond.

"Ah, heavens!" she murmured. "I wonder what my fate will be. How long am I to be confined in this dreadful den?"

She had a chance to put that question to one

of the Hawks shortly after, for Jasper entered the chamber.

"How long are you to be kept a prisoner here?" repeated the pleasant-faced outlaw—for he wore no mask, trusting to his full beard for disguise. "Really I can't tell, little one. The captain will decide that when he comes."

"The captain? Then he is not here?"

"No; he is on duty."

She thought she knew what that duty was and she shuddered.

"Why was I made a prisoner?" she demanded.

Jasper laughed.

"If you ask me no questions I will tell you no lies," he replied.

"Well then, am I to be kept shut up in this lonely place all the time? I cannot stand it long."

The man became interested at once.

"I guess it is a little rough," he admitted.

"You ought to be given a chance to get some fresh air. I will see what can be done about it."

Jasper was as good as his word. A short time later he returned to the "guests' chamber."

"You shall have all the fresh air you need, and be given a chance to look at the blue sky," he declared. "There is little danger that you will escape from this chamber if given permission to go where you please. It is but a short distance to a place where you can obtain as much fresh air as you wish, and when you learn the way, you can go there whenever you like. I will see that the guard is removed from the passage close by, and then I will return to take you to the place of which I speak."

Jasper was as good as his word. The guard was removed, and then he returned and led the girl from the chamber. She noted each turn of the passage as they went along and felt quite sure that she could find her way back with little or no trouble.

The kind outlaw led the way to an opening in the side of the great hill, and she found herself looking down into a deep and wild-appearing basin that was shut in by hills on every side.

"There," said Jasper, "from this place you can look forth at the hills and blue sky. You can breathe the pure air here; but you cannot escape. You cannot climb to the top of the hill far above, and a fall into the sink means death. Be careful not to venture too near the edge."

Hattie thanked him for his kindness, and after promising to return and conduct her back to the chamber, he left her.

Hattie surveyed the situation and soon decided that Jasper had spoken the truth when he said that escape from the opening in the mountain-side was impossible. It made her shudder to look down into the depths of the basin, and at the foot of the perpendicular wall below her she saw the jagged rocks which seemed waiting to destroy the life of some unfortunate victim.

"No, no," she muttered, as she drew back. "That is the last resort."

What did she mean? Was she thinking of hurling herself down to death?

Jasper did not have to show the captive maiden back to the chamber from which she had come. When she got ready to return she found her way without any difficulty. From that hour she was permitted to range through the Hawks' Den wherever she chose, providing she did not attempt to enter a certain passage which led to the main entrance and which was constantly guarded.

On the second day after she became a prisoner in the Den of the Gold Hills outlaws, Jasper told her that the chief, Captain Hawk, had been in the cave, but business had called him away without giving him a chance to speak with his fair prisoner.

The following day, while Hattie was sitting on the ground near the opening in the hillside, she noticed a tall form that stood in plain view on the opposite side of the basin. She looked at this unknown person closely and decided that he was a young man. The distance prevented her from telling how his features looked.

Suddenly a wild hope was born in her bosom. The unknown was looking toward the opening where she stood. He might be a friend and if she could attract his attention possibly she could inform him of her situation.

An instant later she was frantically waving her handkerchief.

Would he see it?

Almost as soon as she asked herself the question it was answered. The young man waved his hat over his head and then seemed to make a gesture of encouragement. A moment later he disappeared from the crag on which he had stood.

Was he coming to her rescue? If so, how would he accomplish his purpose?

With feverish impatience she waited. The minutes seemed hours. She feared that some of the outlaws might come to the opening and defeat her hoped-for rescue.

"Heavens! will he never come?" she breathed.

She knew not how he was coming, but a great

hope that he would save her had found a place in her heart.

But as the moments wore away that hope grew smaller and smaller.

She was wringing her hands and on the point of breaking into tears when she saw something shoot down past the opening. It had seemed like a small stone.

With wildly beating heart, she waited—for what?

The question was soon answered. A rope, lowered from above, came into view. There was a noose at the end of it.

For a moment the girl stood frozen in her tracks; then she espied a slip of paper attached to the rope.

In an instant she had it in her hand. There was writing upon it, and this was what she read:

"Slip the noose around your body beneath your arms and then jerk the rope. Trust to me; I will save you. A FRIEND."

With fear and trembling lest one of the outlaws should come ere she could do so, Hattie hastened to obey the directions written on the paper. Swiftly she adjusted the noose and then gave the signal pull.

With a prayer on her lips, she felt herself swing out of the opening and go slowly upward. She closed her eyes, not daring to look on the terrible rocks far below.

CHAPTER XI.

PARSON PERKINS ACTS PECULIAR.

WITH untold wonder Jolly Jack watched the strange girl—or was it a spirit—go upward into the air and disappear in the dark shadow of the cliff above. He could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes.

"Am I dreaming?" muttered the young man.

But he was wide-awake, and the ascension of the beautiful unknown was an actual occurrence and not a hallucination of the night.

Slowly he walked forward and stood on the very spot where the girl had stood a few seconds before. There he found nothing that solved the mystery of the strange ascent.

"Well," murmured Jack, "this will be a great yarn for the boys. Toby will be surer than ever that I saw a 'spookess.' If I was inclined to be at all superstitious, I might think so myself."

He gazed upward, but saw nothing but the darkness beneath the overhanging cliff.

A moment later he turned and walked back toward the tent. He was yet two or three rods from the tent when he saw a man come sneaking out from beneath the canvas covering, into the moonlight.

It was Parson Phineas Perkins!

"Hello!" thought the young miner. "What's that chap up to? He looks as if he had stolen a sheep. I wonder what he is going to do?"

But Jack never knew just what the Parson had intended to do, for at that moment Perkins discovered that he was watched. For an instant he seemed undecided whether to run or remain where he was. Before he could come to a decision, Jack had him by the collar.

"Ah-a!" laughed the young miner. "You don't seem to rest well, Parson."

Jack spoke in a low tone so that he would not disturb those within the tent.

The strange Parson stammered and looked dismayed for an instant. Then he caught at Jack's words.

"No, no," he mumbled. "I don't rest reel well. Ye see, I'm in a strange place and that makes me feel reel oneasy—it duz, reely."

"And so you thought you would get up and walk around did you?"

"Yes, yes, that's it."

"Well, this is a bad place for prowlers. You are apt to run on a wolf, looking for whom he may devour. Or, if not that, one of the boys is liable to look out of the tent and take you for a bear. If they do, they will shoot first and investigate afterwards. It is actually unsafe to be prowling round about this time of night."

"Dew tell!"

The Parson's surprise and alarm seemed genuine enough, but the night-watch could not help thinking that it was assumed.

"I advise you to go back and go to sleep," said Jack, looking Perkins full in the face. "And remember that some one is looking out for crooked moves all the time."

The Parson said nothing more, but crept back into the tent. Jack shook his head soberly.

"There is something crooked about that fellow sure enough," he muttered. "I will keep wide-awake the rest of the time while I am on guard. My little story of the strange girl and her singular disappearance will keep till morning."

Then he once more flung himself down on the ground and lay watching the moon as it crept out of sight beyond the western verge of the canyon far above. His mind was filled with thoughts of his strange visitor and of Parson Perkins's peculiar actions.

Slowly the moon slipped over to the west till the bottom of Wind Canyon lay in darkness. Still the young miner lay on his back with his face turned toward the sky. His regular breath-

ing told that he had fallen asleep despite his determination to keep awake until relieved from duty.

Jolly Jack did not see the dark form that crept out of the tent and, unchallenged, stole away in the darkness. And straight through the night the sentinel and those he failed to guard slept on.

When morning came it was discovered that Parson Perkins was gone!

"Sufferin' Sampson!" grunted Dismal Dan. "So ther blamed critter has levanted? Waal, I 'spected it. But whar wus ther guard?"

"Sleeping at his post," replied Jack, with visible shame.

The young miner told his story of the Parson's peculiar actions in the night, finding some interested listeners in his companions.

"Wonder w'at ther durned critter stole?" said Dan, when Jack had finished.

This inquiry set the boys to searching, but a thorough investigation failed to reveal that anything was missing.

"S durned quare!" was the old Range Tramp's opinion. "I dunno jest w'at ter think o' ther durned cuss. Thar's suthin' wrong 'bout him."

Up to this moment Toby had been a silent but interested listener. He now spoke up:

"Say, boss."

"Waal, what?"

"If er t'ing ain't right, den it mus' be wrong, eh?"

"Thet's 'bout ther size o' it," Dan admitted.

"Den dar wus suthin' wrong 'bout dat dar Parson, suah."

"W'at?"

"His lef' foot, 'ca'se 'tain't right."

Then Toby burst into a roar of laughter and dodged round the corner of the tent just in time to avoid a small stone which Jack hurled at him. But Dan never smiled in the least; in fact, he looked disgusted.

"It's ser ole that it smells," he muttered.

When the mysterious disappearance of the strange Down-Easter had been thoroughly discussed, Jack told them of the girl who had appeared and vanished in such a remarkable manner. His listeners were deeply interested, but Roy was inclined to think that Jack had been dreaming again. Toby, who had come out from behind the tent, was the only one who seemed to believe that the young miner had seen just what he fancied he had.

Jack soon discovered that his companions were much more interested in the singular moves of the peculiar Parson.

While they ate a hurried breakfast, Dan and Roy discussed the advisability of going out to look after the missing man, and although neither of them thought it probable that they would find a trace of him, they finally decided to do so.

Jack and Toby were left behind with instructions to look out for trouble, for it was thought that the Parson might have been sent into the young miner's camp as a spy of the Gold Hawks, to whom it was believed he was connected.

The old borderman and his young friend made their way out of Wind Canyon and struck into the Hills at random. They realized that they would be as liable to find the one for whom they sought in that way as in any.

"Ef I ever do meet thet slippy critter, thar'll be er leetle understandin'," Dismal declared.

"I fear that when we see him again he will have enough of the outlaws with him to clean out our crowd," said Roy.

"An' I'm 'feered o' ther same," admitted the veteran ranger. "I didn't believe his yarn 'bout ther emmygrant train, an' now I know he wuz lyin'."

For more than an hour after leaving the Canyon they proceeded onward, seeing no signs of the Parson. Dan had not attempted to pick up Perkins's train at the entrance to the canyon, for the nature of the ground made such a thing next to an impossibility.

But Fortune seemed to smile upon them.

Suddenly they heard voices not far away, and cautiously they crept forward to investigate.

A short distance beyond a point of rocks they saw three men, one of whom appeared to be a prisoner in the custody of the other two.

The latter they instantly recognized.

It was the Parson.

CHAPTER XII.

A HARD MAN TO HOLD.

"SUFFERIN' Sampson!" muttered Dismal Dan. "Thar's ther critter w'at we're arter."

"Yes," replied Roy, in a cautious tone; "and he seems to have found friends."

"Fr'en's!" snorted the old man. "I don't keer fer enny o' thet kind, thankee!"

"Let's keep quiet, and see if we can hear what they are saying."

But they soon discovered that, although the hum of the three men's voices came to their ears, they could not distinguish what they were saying. The Parson seemed quite excited, and as he talked, he made expressive gestures with his long arms. His captors paid little heed to him, however.

"W'at's be tryin' ter do—preach?" muttered Dan.

"There isn't much preach to that," was Roy's opinion. "He is trying to convince them that they have made a mistake."

"Weepin' Isreel! I beleve ye'r' right, lad."

The three men continued to talk for a few minutes, and then they suddenly paused. The next instant the two strangers seized the Parson's arms. A most astonishing thing followed.

With a sudden effort the strange Parson hurled his two captors to the right and left as if they were children. They both staggered back a few steps, and when they recovered their equilibrium a revolver flashed in the hand of one of them, sending a sharp report echoing through the Hills.

But the Parson was not touched.

Like a tiger he leaped straight at the man with the revolver. Up into the air he went, and an instant later his feet struck the fellow in the stomach, sending him to the ground in a heap fifteen feet away!

Quick as a flash the Parson wheeled, just in time to prevent a shot from the foe behind him. The man's revolver was out, but he never used it. Parson Perkins's fist shot out from the shoulder, and the second man measured his length on the ground.

"Pashent Job!" gasped the Range Tramp.

"By Jove! he can fight like a tiger!" Roy exclaimed.

"Fight!" echoed Dan. "Waal, I sh'd say so."

The fellow who had felt the Parson's feet lay quite still, evidently in an unconscious condition. The other scrambled to his feet and was promptly knocked down again. This was repeated twice, and then the unlucky fellow got up and ran as if for his life. The Parson did not attempt to pursue him, but turned his attention to the other.

It would be useless to attempt to describe the surprise of the two unseen witnesses of this brief struggle. The old man and the youth could not express their own amazement, but they looked into each others' eyes and read it there.

"Thet thar gits me," Dan confessed.

"Let's go out there," said Roy. "He is examining that other fellow, and we can get close upon him before he knows it."

"Thet's all rite, lad; but hev yer gun reddey. Thet galoot may shoot mighty suddint like."

Both men advanced with their rifles ready for instant use. They hoped to take the Parson by surprise, but it almost seemed that the strange man had eyes in the back of his head, for although he did not look round, he suddenly leaped to his feet and fled like a deer away from them. Both men were amazed, but Dan instantly shouted:

"Halt, thar! halt or we'll sock ye full o' lead!"

But the cry seemed to increase Parson Perkins's speed, and in a remarkably brief space of time, he disappeared beyond some bowlders.

"Shall we follow him, Dan?" asked Roy.

The old ranger shook his head.

"No, lad; it's our duty ter look arter ther pore critter w'at he knocked silly. I reckon we kin fin' out all we want ter frum him. He wuzn't arter ther Parson fer nuthin'."

As they approached they heard the unfortunate man groaning faintly as if in great pain. They were soon beside him and found that, although not unconscious, he was so badly hurt that he seemed unable to move. He paid little heed to them as they bent over him.

"Pore cuss!" said the old borderman. "He ran against a perfec' cyclone thet time. P'raps he hain't had hurt. Kinder got his wind knocked out I reckon. Er leetle o' this will bring him roun' right peert."

The veteran ranger produced a flask of liquor and quickly held the nozzle to the injured man's lips.

"Jest swaller er bit o' ther p'izen stuff," advised Dismal. "It'll do ye good, pard."

Dan was right; a few drops of the liquor worked a remarkable change in the unlucky fellow. He ceased to groan, although he lay still with his eyes closed for several minutes and breathed very hard.

"Reckon ther cuss struck ye pritty nigh whar ye live, hey, pard?" the old borderman said. "Waal, thet's ther way o' ther worl'. It's full o' hard knocks an' sufferin' an' sin. Fu'st yer up, then ye'r' down—then ye'r' 'way down."

There was not much consolation in either the old man's face or words, but the injured man's eyes unclosed and became fastened on Dan's long figure. He seemed to scan the Range Tramp closely, and then he turned his attention to Roy.

"Reckon you'll knew us next time, pard," Dan observed grimly. "P'raps you've seen us afore?"

The unfortunate shook his head.

"Oh, waal, I sha'n't feel enny hardness erg'in' ye on thet 'count. We don't 'spect everybuddy ter go roun' huntin' us up jest so thet they'll know us next time."

"Ask him about the Parson," whispered Roy.

"Don't be in er hurry lad," said Dan. "I'll pump him w'en he gits his wind. Ye can't 'spect er man ter tork without enny wind."

Neither Dan nor Roy saw the sudden gleam which came into the stranger's eyes. It said as

plainly as words that he was not going to be pumped if he knew himself.

Finally the injured man was able to sit up.

"How do ye feel, pard?" asked Dan.

"A little—no, considerable better, thanks to you-uns."

The old borderman looked at the stranger closely, as if something in his words had puzzled him.

"Who wuz thet galoot w'at knocked ye out?" was Dan's second question.

The stranger closed his lips firmly and stared straight at the old man.

"W'at's ther trouble with yer tongue?" demanded Dan instantly. "Dnz it want er leetle 'niz?"

The man did not answer.

Dan's face assumed a most mournful look.

"Thet's ther way o' ther worl'," he sighed. "No matter w'at yer do fer 'em, they hain't goin' ter do er durned thing fer you in turn."

"Perhaps this man can be persuaded to speak," said Roy significantly.

Dan caught at the idea.

"Thet's er fac' lad. Hyer's ther persuader."

Then Dismal removed a revolver from its place in his belt and deliberately cocked it.

"This is one o' ther greatest persuaders o' ther Nineteenth Century," he continued. "I've seen people persuaded with this thet never wuz persuaded afore.—Lad, jest look over this pilgrim's wearables an' see if you kin find ary thing as looks like it growed on ther same vine with this hyer."

"Gents," said the unlucky man, "if you are after money, you will find very little on my person. What I have you are welcome to if you will leave my weapons."

"W'at d'yer took us fer?" snorted Dan, in disgust. "We hain't robbers, an' as fer bein' gents—waal, thet's too much!"

The stranger looked incredulous.

"I calculate you belong to the same gang that the man we attempted to arrest does," he said.

"W'at gang's thet?"

But again the man closed his lips, firmly.

"Now don't go ter actin' out ther fool!" growled the Range Tramp. "Ef ye try ter play muel, ye may find it onpleasant. You're goin' ter tork, or I'm goin' ter know ther reason why. I mean bizness!"

Then, while Dan kept the stranger under the muzzle of his revolver, Roy searched his clothes and removed his weapons. When this was done, Dismal said, grimly:

"Now, Pard Stranger, we'll lissen ter ye warble. Thar are one er two things as we'd like ter know, an' we're goin' ter know 'em or leave you rite hyer fer ther kiotes. This hain't no foolin' biz. Ef you treat us squar', we'll use you white, you bet."

"What do you want to know?" asked the man sullenly.

Dan winked soberly to Roy.

"Waal, ther fu'st thing is: W'at wuz ye doin' ter our fr'en'?"

"And so that devil is a friend of you-uns, is he?"

"Hole on, pard! I'm doin' ther axin' questions jest now. You do ther answerin' an' it'll be all rite. W'at ef he wuz our fr'en'?"

"He's a mighty poor friend to have!" was the prompt reply.

"An' w'y?"

"Look here, pards," said the man, looking Dan straight in the face; "I know I am in a mighty snug box and it is no use for me to beat round the bush. When I started out with Sackett to run down Slyly Smith, they told me I would not come back alive, but I resolved to take my chances. Luck has gone against me."

"An' who in ther name o' Sufferin' Sampson is Slyly Smith?"

"You ought to be able to answer that question as well as I. In these Hills Slyly Smith is known as Captain Hawk, a robber and cut-throat."

"Waal, w'at's thet got ter do with ther Parson?"

"The Parson?"

"Yas, ther man w'at got erway with you an' yer pard."

The stranger laughed shortly.

"That is the last thing I should ever think of calling that double-dyed villain," he said. "Parson! Why, that man is in league with Satan. That is simply one of his thousands of disguises."

Dan cast a significant look at Roy. His suspicions concerning the Parson were confirmed.

"Are you reddey ter sw'ar thet this Parson's Cap'n Hawk?" asked the old ranger.

"Why do you ask me that question?" demanded the stranger. "You can answer it yourself after a manner, for no one should know Captain Hawk better."

"Waal, then, w'at are you arter Slyly Smith fer?"

"Two thousand dollars are offered for his delivery alive in Laramie."

"What are ther charges erg'in' him?"

"Horse-stealing and murder."

"An' you are an officer?"

"You know that well enough."

"How should I?"

The man flung out one hand in an impatient gesture.

"You were on the watch for us—Slyly said so. He boasted that we could not take him out of the Hills even if there were ten of us instead of two."

"Look hyer, pard," said Dan, with sudden earnestness, "w'at ef we hain't outlaws?"

"But I know you are, so there's no if about it."

"By the Sufferin' Sampson!" roared the old Range Tramp, apparently in sudden fury. "I believe you are an outlaw yerself! You've played a pritty sharp game, but it won't work. This hyer sinful worl's full o' treachery an' deceit, an' I calkerlate you are er double-an'-twisted piece o' ther latter artykil. We'll jest took you inter camp, an' talk this hyer biz over."

Then with one heavy surge Dan brought the stranger to his feet.

"Now," said Dan, handling his revolver threateningly, "jest you march straight erlong in ther deereshun that you are p'inted, an' min' yer eye. 'Member we're both ahind ye with er Winchester apiece, 'sides cur small guns. Ef you make er break you'll be pritty ap' ter git hurted."

Roy was surprised at this sudden act of Dan's, but he said nothing, feeling sure that the old man knew his business. The youth did not fancy taking this stranger to their secret camp in Wind Canyon, but a cautioning look from the old borderman caused him to hold his peace.

And so the march began.

Fifteen minutes later they were passing through a wooded defile. Suddenly Dismal seemed to strike his toe against something, but strangely enough, he fell backward instead of forward. Roy was following close behind, and of course he stumbled over Dan.

"Weepin' Isreal!" grunted the old borderman.

Then he scrambled to his feet to bear the prisoner go crashing through the bushes several rods away.

"Halt!" bellowed the old Hills Ranger—"halt, I say! Stop er we'll fire!"

The only answer was a mocking laugh that floated back through the bushes.

CHAPTER XIII.

RIFLE ROY MAKES A DISCOVERY.

BUT Dan did not offer to fire. Instead, he whirled toward his young companion, saying:

"Pashent Job! how thet galoot—"

But he stopped suddenly, for Roy had made a break in pursuit of the fleeing man.

"Hyer!" shouted the old ranger; "stop! Let 'im go! Hole on thar, lad!"

But, either Roy did not hear or did not understand the old man's words, for he did not pause.

With a muttered exclamation of anger, Dan sprang after the youth, thinking to quickly overtake him. But Roy was running like a deer, determined to overtake the fugitive.

"Weepin' Isreal!" spluttered Dan, as he lunged along through the bushes. "Hain't this hyer er go, now? I didn't s'pose ther lad w'd fly off ther hinges like thet or I'd 'a' gi'n him ther wink. Blame it all! There's no knowin' how fur ther boy will chase ther derved galoot. W'at er worl' o' misery an' mistakes this are!"

It was not long before the old borderman began to puff in a way that plainly indicated that he was nearly winded. Then he broke through the bushes just in time to see his young companion disappear beyond a point of rocks.

"Great 'flutterin' flapjacks!" groaned the Range Tramp. "Jest looker thet! Ef I'd knowed w'at er blamed piece er work it'd made, I'd had er little care 'bout how I giv thet galoot er chance ter slope. I thort thet wuz er good chance thar in ther bushes, an' so I flopped, an' tripped ther lad at ther same time, knowin' thet ef thet feller wuz tellin' ther truth, and really tuck us fer outlaws, he w'd meck er break, an' we'd git shut o' him 'thout enny trouble. Ther boy didn't drap ter ther game. Thet made er mess o' ther hull 'fair, an' I feel like kickin' merself!"

Dan was heartily disgusted.

"I jest can't keep within howlin' distance," he whined, as he stumbled along. "Ef 'twuzn't fer ther blamed roomatiz, I'd run with ther best o' 'em. But ther ole man hain't w'at he uster wuz—no, he hain't! Sufferin' Sampson! I've see'd ther time w'en it tuck er mighty good boy ter keep within hailin' distance w'en Dan Sudly let himself out in 'arnest. They uster call me Dan ther Dasher. But I've had more nor nine hundred diseases since then, an' I've got ter give up tryin' ter run."

When the old borderman reached the point of rocks behind which he had seen Roy disappear, he discovered that neither the youth nor the man he was pursuing were to be seen. An exclamation of dismay came from his lips.

"Blamed ef ther lad hain't got beyond sight! Thet is beastly luck. There's no knowin' how fur he'll foller 't'other 'un. I don't see w'at ther boy wuz thinkin' of. Seems like he must 'a' heerd me w'en I hollered. But I hain't goin'

back ter ther camp 'bout ther lad, bet yer boots! I'm goin' ter sot rite down byer an' rest er while, then I'll go on an' see ef I kin fine ther young hot-head."

Then the old borderman found a small boulder and sat down.

Meanwhile Rifle Roy was doing his level best to keep the escaped prisoner in view. Roy knew that Dan was a very poor runner, and felt that, if the man was recaptured, he would have to overtake him without any of Dan's assistance. In the excitement of the fall and escape, the youth's wits had become slightly muddled or he would have seen that Dan's awkward tumble was not genuine, but assumed, that the prisoner might have a chance to escape. But Roy did not stop to think.

The fugitive was a speedy runner, and Roy soon discovered that he was to have a hard race. This only spurred him on to do his level best, and at the same time gave him little chance to consider what he was doing.

Roy had heard Dan's cry, but had not understood the old man's words. He thought the old Hills ranger was calling to the fleeing man to halt.

"If I can't catch him, I'll give him a little run just for the fun of the thing," muttered Roy, through his teeth.

But the fugitive was crafty, and dodged about in a manner that was quite puzzling for the pursuer. Once or twice Roy lost sight of the running man, who, had he possessed a weapon, would doubtlessly have turned at bay. After a time the chase became more of a game of hide and seek than anything else.

"You can't shake me very easy," laughed the youthful pursuer, as he started up his game for the fifth or sixth time. "I fancy that you are getting winded, or you would make a straight run, and not resort to such tricks. As long as I can keep on your trail as easy as this, I will follow you."

It was not long before the chase led Roy into a wild and gloomy section; but the youth was so taken with following the fugitive that he paid little heed to his surroundings.

Finally the man gave the young trailer the slip, and Roy was unable to tell which way his game had gone.

"I know the course he was pursuing when I last sighted him," muttered the rifle expert. "I am going to go on in that direction for a time. 'I can easily find Dan when I turn back; or, if he does not wait for me, I shall find him at camp."

Roy little realized how far he had traveled.

On he went into the wild-appearing country, but now he took more notice of his surroundings. Gradually he became oppressed by the dismal grandeur of the rock-ribbed hills and the wild ravines. Still he wandered on.

At last he halted on the side of a hill where he could look down into an immense basin which was surrounded on all sides by almost perpendicular bluffs.

"By gracious!" he said, aloud. "There don't seem to be much of an opening out of that sink-hole. If a man got in there he might find it no easy thing to regain his liberty."

He leaned on his rifle and gazed down into the basin for a long time. Finally his attention was attracted by a large opening in a hillside at one side of the basin.

"It looks like the mouth of a cave," he muttered.

In fact he was looking at the very opening to the cave of the Gold Hawks where Hattie Holmes was at that moment gazing out into the basin. The black shadows concealed the girl's figure from him for a time, but she finally approached nearer the mouth of the opening and he caught a glimpse of her dress.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "That looked like a woman's dress that I saw then!"

He kept his eyes fastened on the opening and it was not long before he saw the girl's dress again, although he did not discern the outline of her figure.

"I believe that is the opening to a cave, and that it was a female that I just saw," he declared, with growing excitement.

Then a sudden thought seemed to strike him.

"Heavens!" he cried. "What if that is the mouth—or one mouth—to the cave of the Black Hills Hawks! If so, I have made a most important discovery."

Then he settled down to watch the opening with renewed interest. He was soon rewarded, for at about that time Hattie discerned the youth on the hillside.

"By gracious! there is a woman there!" exclaimed Roy, in great excitement, as the girl came out into view. "I believe that she is waving her handkerchief to me!"

Instantly he replied by waving his hat around his head.

"That is a lady and she is in distress," the young rifle expert told himself. "I have an idea that I really have discovered one opening that leads into the Hawks' Den and that the lady whom I can see is in distress—a captive probably. If so, how am I going to rescue her?"

His keen eyes soon took in the lay of the land and he decided his own question. The opening

was not far below a wide shelf that ran around the hill, or mountain. From that shelf a rope could be lowered to the opening.

"If she wants to escape from that place, I will get her out of that," declared Roy, as he made a hasty decision on the best way to reach the shelf above the opening. "The rope around my waist will do the work."

Around his waist he always carried a horse-hair rope, or—properly—a lariat. It was small, but being fine-woven, was wonderfully strong. This he knew would serve him well if the unknown female in the opening desired to escape.

Considering the nature of the ground, it did not take Roy long to gain the shelf above the opening, although it seemed to the excited and expectant girl that almost an age elapsed from the time that he vanished from her sight till the lasso dangled before her eyes.

Roy had made the rope fast on the shelf, so that if anything should happen that the lariat should escape from his grasp the unknown female would not go plunging down to death on the rocks at the bottom of the basin. After lowering the noose he watched it as it went downward till he saw a white hand reach out and grasp it.

"She is there!" he cried, softly. "She has my note! What will follow? Will she trust her fate in the hands of a stranger?"

His question was soon answered. He felt a quick pull on the rope.

"Now to pull her up," he said through his teeth.

With remarkable ease—for he was a strong youth—the young miner drew the girl upward toward the shelf. When she reached the edge of the shelf, he reached over and grasped her arms. Then, for the first time he saw her wonderfully pretty face—as white at that moment as the purest marble. What a great leap his heart gave as he looked straight into the depths of those wondrous blue eyes, so full of terror and supplication! She was as helpless as a child when he drew her up over the edge of the shelf. She seemed like a broken flower.

"You are safe," he whispered.

Her eyes alone replied, for although her lips moved, no sound came from them. But, seeming utterly incapable of moving, she lay in his arms and a soft, murmuring sigh of thankfulness came from beyond her pale lips.

What was it that seemed to pierce his very soul at that instant? What caused the mad feeling of joy within his bosom? Why did his heart seem to cry out: "How pure! how beautiful! For her I could live—or die!"

And then, like the croaking of an evil spirit, a harsh voice behind them cried:

"Drop that gal, young feller, or I'll bore ye!"

CHAPTER XIV.

FOR LIFE AND LOVE!

THE sudden shock of an earthquake could scarcely have been more startling at that moment.

Hattie heard that harsh command, and with sudden strength sprang away. Quick as a flash, Roy whirled to face a masked man who stood within ten feet of him, holding a revolver with the drop covering the young miner's brain!

"Ha, ha!" laughed the mask, as he noted Roy's consternation. "Quite er leetle surprise-party, eh, yonker?"

For a moment Roy did not reply. He was recovering his self-possession. Finally he demanded:

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

Again the man laughed harshly.

"Who am I, and what do I want, hey? Well, you'll mighty soon find out what I want. As for who I am, you can guess at that."

Roy saw the eyes beyond the twin holes in the mask twinkle strangely, and a shiver ran over him. There was a deadly gleam in those shining orbs.

"He means murder," thought the young miner.

"Fu'st thing," continued the masked man, "I want that gal."

"Well, you cannot have her," promptly declared the young miner.

The mask uttered a laugh that was half a snarl.

"You talk kinder loud fer a boy. I reckon if I want the gal, why, I'll just take her."

"And I reckon you just won't," was the calm response.

"What'll hinder?"

"I will."

At this the mask seemed to become very much amused, but his laugh was far from pleasant.

"My dear boy," he chuckled, "you will observe that I have the drop, and have it b-a-d—bad. I can cook your hash in a jiff if I feel so inclined."

There was no disputing that the unknown had the advantage in a way that was decidedly disagreeable to the youthful rifle expert. For a time Roy knew not what to say.

"You perceive the p'int, I observe," continued the man with the revolver. "Now that you have come to your senses, I want to ask

you a few questions. Fu'st, how came you here?"

"In a great measure I am indebted to my feet for bringing me," was the cool reply.

"Did friends come with you?"

At that moment Roy believed that he understood why the masked man—who he felt sure was one of the Black Hills Hawks—had not shot him at once. The outlaw wished to learn if there were others in that vicinity.

"I do not usually tramp around alone," he replied.

This answer seemed to give the man a bit of uneasiness.

"Then you have friends near?"

"Well, I should say so."

"How many?"

"That is for you to discover."

The mask uttered an angry oath.

"You had better answer my questions, young man," he growled.

Roy laughed, as if quite at ease.

"If you don't answer them, I'll bore you," snapped the outlaw. "Where are your friends?"

"That also is for you to discover. You may learn where they are sooner than you desire."

With increasing satisfaction Roy saw that the masked man was becoming more and more alarmed.

"I'll get him into shape to work an old trick on him pretty soon," thought the youth.

Roy did not dare to take his eyes off the man long enough to cast a glance toward where he knew the girl whom he had drawn out of the Hawks' Den was standing, a silent and trembling witness of this interview over a loaded revolver; but he resolved to make a desperate attempt to save his own life, and keep her from again falling into the hands of the Gold Hawks.

"Looker here, young feller," cried the outlaw, shaking the revolver threateningly, "you want to talk and talk straight, for if you don't, I'm goin' to snuff your candle."

"The chances are that that would be a very unhealthy thing—for you. If you throw me cold, my pards will have your scalp, if they have to follow you to Kingdom Come."

"I don't believe you have any pards in this vicinity."

Again Roy laughed.

"I'll bet you two to one you change your mind within ten minutes," he declared.

"Well, pards or no pards, I am going to have that gal."

"What claim have you on her?"

"She belongs to me."

Hattie sprang forward and laid a hand on Roy's arm.

"It is false, sir!" she cried. "He has no claim at all on me. He belongs to the band of outlaws who kidnapped me from an emigrant train bound for these Hills. Oh, sir! do not let me fall into their power again!"

Her touch and her voice thrilled the young man strangely. In a moment he felt that he loved this unknown girl whom he had torn from the talons of the Border Hawks. He had never seen her before, yet his heart had been strangely moved the instant he looked on her pale, yet beautiful, face. And now her voice moved him in a most singular manner.

"I will save you or die!" he breathed.

The words were very low, but he knew she heard them, for, although she did not speak, he felt a soft pressure on his arm.

"Stand back, there, gal!" commanded the masked man. "Git away from that young feller if you don't want to drop when he does. I'm goin' to salt him."

But instead of obeying his command, she sprang directly in front of the young miner.

"Shoot, you coward! shoot if you dare!" she cried.

But Rifle Roy was not the kind of a person who hides behind a woman's skirts. In a moment he caught her and gently whirled her to one side out of harm's way. At the same time he seemed to be looking directly over the masked man's shoulder, as if he saw something of interest there. Then he cried:

"Drop him, Dan! drop him!"

The ruse was successful. Roy's talk about his "pards" had been made so that he might try an old trick on the outlaw.

Like a flash the man wheeled to look behind him, and then, with a panther-like leap, the youth was upon him. The fellow had detected the trick and partly turned to meet the attack. A sharp blow from Roy's fist knocked the revolver from the outlaw's hand. Then they grappled.

"Curse you!" snarled the mask. "You played it on me, but I'll cook your goose just the same."

The young rifle sharp said not a word, but exerted his utmost strength in the endeavor to hurl his foe to the ground. He felt that he was fighting for more than life. Another's freedom, happiness—perhaps honor—depended on his success. If he failed—But he would not!

Round and round whirled the two madly struggling men. They began to breathe in quick gasps; their faces grew crimson, though one was concealed beneath a mask. They were both doing their utmost, for both realized what a terrible thing failure meant.

With clasped hands and a blanched face, Hattie Holmes watched the terrible struggle. She prayed that her rescuer might be the victor, but more than once it seemed that her prayer was wasted.

Roy soon discovered that the masked outlaw was a very strong man. The young miner himself was unusually stout, but it seemed that he had met more than his match. But thoughts of the beautiful girl whom he had drawn from the grasp of the Hills Scourges nerved him to still mightier efforts.

"For life and—for love!" he thought.

But suddenly the outlaw hurled the youth to the ground.

"Ah-a! I have you!" panted the masked man.

"Not much!" was the reply, as Roy slipped from the grasp of his foe.

And then the battle was renewed with redoubled fury.

Once or twice the outlaw had made a move to use a knife, but Roy was looking for something of the kind and promptly baffled each attempt. Then the man decided to hurl his youthful foe off the shelf.

"You've got to die!" he gritted.

Once both of the contending men tottered on the very verge of the terrible fall. For a moment it seemed that both were doomed, but suddenly they reeled back from the danger that menaced them. Then the battle went on once more.

But, it could not last forever. Slowly both of the contestants became weaker and the struggle grew less fierce. They panted and gasped as if strangling. Then they reeled toward the edge of the shelf again.

"Curse you!" gasped the outlaw. "If I've got to go under, I'll take you with me!"

Then it seemed that the desperate man tried to hurl himself into the basin, still clinging to the young miner. Again they hung trembling on the very edge of the cliff.

Then, with an almost superhuman effort, Roy tore himself from the grasp of his mad foe. Utterly exhausted, the youth sunk down on the very verge of the shelf. But the masked man could not regain his balance, and, with one last wild cry of horror, he went down to his doom!

For five minutes Rifle Roy lay on the edge of the terrible fall, his eyes closed, his face bloodless, looking like one dead. Then a long, fluttering sigh escaped his lips and his eyes slowly unclosed. In another minute's time he raised himself slightly and looked around.

"Gone!" came faintly from his lips.

Yes, the one for whom he looked was gone! Thinking that her rescuer was doomed, and realizing that she could render him no assistance, Hattie Holmes had fled from the spot long before the terrible struggle ended. She had determined to escape from the victor, whom she felt certain would be the outlaw.

When Roy discovered that Hattie was really gone, his strength came back to him with remarkable rapidity.

"I must follow and overtake her," he said aloud.

Then he arose slowly to his feet and started to leave the shelf. His legs were very weak, but he tottered along after a fashion.

"I saved her," he muttered brokenly. "I fought for more than my own life."

He thought that he would soon come upon her, but he was disappointed. He reached the foot of the mountain without seeing anything of her, and there he sunk down once more. Blood rushed to his brain, and for a time he thought his head would burst. For a short time he was unconscious, and when he recovered he could not remember where he was or what had happened. His senses were badly muddled.

"I must get back to camp," he muttered. "But it seems that I have forgotten something that I wanted to remember."

Try as he might, he could not recollect what had occurred, although there was a confused jumble of ideas in his head.

It was more than two hours later that he found himself seated on a small bowlder far from the place where the terrible struggle had taken place. And then in an instant he remembered all that had occurred.

"Great heavens!" he cried, leaping to his feet. What has been the matter with me? Where is the girl whom I rescued from the mountain cave?"

And then he glanced around to see six mounted men ride into view less than ten rods away!

CHAPTER XV.

INTO SATAN'S SINK.

"GREAT flutterin' flapjacks!" sighed Dismal Dan, as he sat on the bowlder and gazed mournfully around. "This hyer's w'at I calls misfortunate; but it's ther way ther worl' allus used me. I never laid out er good plan but ther forchune w'u'd up an' plank her great foot rite inter ther middle o' it. Ther ole lady allus seemed sot on buttin' 'gainst uvery thing I dun. W'en I wuz er leetle runt an' went ter skule an' studded hard ter learn ter spell k-a-t, cat, an'

wuz dead sure I c'u'd do it, suthin' 'd 'most allus happen so I'd git it wrong w'en I got out afore ther teacher. 'Thet wuz diskuragin', an' I guv up goin' ter skule jest afore I wuz ter graduate, so't I never got no diplomy arter I'd bin ter skule three hull weeks. I never had no courage ter try it erg'in."

"Now hyer's ernuther sample o' ther durned preeversity o' my luck. I had uverything piotted out slick's er whissel how we'd git rid o' ther galoot as we didn't want. We got rid o' ther feller well ernuff, but ther boy had ter go whoopin' orf arter him like he wuz er leetle yaller dorg with er bunch o' fire-crackers tied ter his tail. Sufferin' Sampson! 'thet's w'at disgusts me!"

"Ef 'twuzn't fer gratifyin' myself, I'd go orf sumw'ares whar I'd never be foun' an' lay down an' tire myself ter death tryin' ter rest—I w'u'd, by gum!"

And to add emphasis to this last assertion the old man brought one skeleton hand down on his thin leg with a force that made him flinch. Then he glared straight at the ground in stern silence for several moments.

Finally he broke out again:

"W'at am I goin' ter do—foller ther boy? 'Sno use ter think o' ketchin' up with him, fer he kin most prob'ly run like er streak o' greased wind. Pr'aps he'll ketch up with ther galoot an' try ter bring him back. Ef he sh'u'd—"

"Blame ther luck! I s'pose I'd better be movin' long arter ther lad. Pr'aps I'll meet 'im cumin' back, but it'd be jest like 'im ter chase ther critter clean ter ther North Pole, ef he c'u'd keep track o' him. I don't want ter go back without ther lad, an' so I may ez well move along arter him. Ef he does ketch ther chap w'at got er dose o' ther Parson's boots, I'll hev ter studdy out sum other plan ter git shut o' ther galoot. Ef I make it work ez well ez this one did I orter be kinder proud."

Slowly the old man arose to his feet and, rifle in hand, started onward in the direction that Rifle Roy had been moving when last seen by him. Despite the infirmities of which Dan complained so much, he was a fast walker, and now he took on his best jog, still hoping that he might overtake his young companion.

He did not attempt to follow the trail left by the running men, for that would be slow work, and he fancied that by observing the general course pursued he would be pretty sure to find his young friend as he would to pick his way slowly along on a trail that at times passed over ground which showed no mark.

"I'll prob'ly meet ther lad comin' back afore shortly," he mused. "Ther galoot he is arter won't hev much trouble in shakin' him ef he knows his business. It'd take er right smart trailer ter foller er man as wanted ter git erway in these hyer gulches an' reveens."

Dan did not meet Roy as soon as he expected, however. He decided that the young man had made a more stubborn chase than he had calculated on. Finally he again sat down to rest.

"Might ez well take it easy," he muttered.

It happened that he had sat down where he could look back along the ground that he had just passed over, and at the same time be concealed by a mass of bushes. As he sat there he glanced back with little thought that he was pursued.

"Weepin' Isreel!"

In a subdued yet excited tone the Range Tramp expressed his surprise. And well might he be surprised.

That one backward glance had shown him a solitary Indian creeping swiftly along with his eyes fastened on the ground.

The red-skin was trailing the old ranger!

Dismal watched his red foe for a moment, his eyes twinkling strangely.

"So ye'r arter ther ole man, are ye?" he said, beneath his breath. "Waal, we'll try ter inter-juce ye ter er reg'lar s'prise party. Pashent Job! won't we have a whole time!"

Then the old Hills ranger crept into the bushes, yet remaining so that he could leap forth in an instant without making any noise to alarm the approaching red.

"I'm goin' ter try ye er leetle hurl," grimly said the old man. "I uster be putty smart afore ther blamed roomertiz got holt o' me. It tuck er mighty good man ter git erway with Dan Sudly. I reckon I hain't jest w'at I uster was, but I'm goin' ter see w'at kinder stuff's left in me. 'Thet red is er younger man nor I be, but I'll git er holt ter start with thet'll offset thet. Then won't we hev er leetle tussil?"

The old fellow hugged himself in grim delight and silently spit on his hands. For one brief moment he came dangerously near smiling.

He laid his rifle on the ground, having decided not to use it in the coming struggle.

Nearer and nearer came the unconscious red-skin, and Dan crouched for the spring. The old man did not seem to think that there was a chance that the red would get away with him and have the pleasure of lifting his scalp. He seemed to regard the coming contest as a boy might look on a wrestling match.

Finally the unconscious Indian reached the spot where Dan thought it best to leap upon him. Then the old borderman shot through the air.

The Indian had no warning of danger till he felt the clutch of a bony pair of hands on his neck.

"Hello, hyer, dirty-skin!" cried the assailant. "So ye wuz trailin' me, wuz ye? Didn't hardly 'spect ter run slap up erg'in' er s'prise party, did ye? Didn't know Ole Dismal hed eyes inter ther back o' his head, did ye? Sufferin' Sampson! but won't we hev er picnic!"

Although taken by surprise, the Indian soon showed himself no mean foe, and Dismal found hard work to maintain the first hold which gave him a slight advantage.

"Oh, ye w'd, w'd ye?" gritted the old tramp. "Waal, ye can't jest ther same wile yer Uncle Daniel is aroun'. I'll be skinned ef you hain't a hard critter ter hole, but ther ole man is jest ther lad as kin hole ye if ennybuddy kin. We hain't quite ser smart ez we uster wuz, but then, it takes er good big boy ter git erway with ther ainshent zephyr from over ther range—thet's me."

The red-skin made a desperate attempt to use his knife, but Dan was looking for such a move and blocked the trick.

"None o' thet," he grunted. "I hain't hankerin' fer enny o' thet kind o' provender jest now. Jest keep yer knife away frum my ribs an' I'll thank ye. Ef I wanted ter, I c'd give ye a dose o' ther same kind o' stuff. But I'm goin' ter best ye with bare han's or northin'."

Finally both men went down, and in an instant Dismal's hold was broken. Over and over they rolled, and when they arose to their feet they were on equal terms.

"Sufferin' Sampson!" panted Dan; "I reckon ther ole man 'll hev ter git roun' right peert ef he wants ter continner ter roam this hyer worl' o' woe much o' enny longer. But ef I wuzn't all broke up with ther roomatiz, I'd be ther match fer ther best red-skin as ever looked wistfully on er white man's skulp."

In some way Dan managed to trip the red, and when they struck the ground the Range Tramp sprung on the Indian's back, and then the long, skeleton fingers of the pale-face closed around the neck of his red foe.

For a few moments the struggle was terrific; but after a time it became less violent.

Dan was choking the Indian into insensibility!

The battle was soon ended. The unlucky red-man lay unconscious before his white foe.

"I calkerlate it 'u'd be usin' ye right ef I cut yer blamed throat," muttered the victor; "but somehow thet's er leetle too much like murder fer me, even ef you are red. Thar hain't no doubt but thet you'd use ther ole man thet way, but he is goin' ter let ye orf easier."

Then Dan felt over the Indian's body and removed every weapon that he possessed.

"I'll jest take these fer fear thet you may foller me," he said aloud. "An' be movin' erlong afore you cum roun'."

Securing his rifle, Dan moved away, leaving the unconscious red lying on his back where the struggle had ended.

The Range Tramp was in remarkably good humor for him as he moved away from the spot where the battle with the red-skin had taken place. He had proved himself the match for an ordinary man for all of the thousand of ills that had befallen him.

He decided to cover his trail, so that the Indian could not follow it if he should feel inclined to do so when he recovered. This he did in the most skillful manner.

Dan had no thought of turning back toward Wind Canyon just then, for he had seen nothing of Rifle Roy since the youth had disappeared in pursuit of the escaped prisoner.

An hour later the old borderman found himself in a familiar locality.

"The Devil's Sink is not far from here," he mused.

"The Devil's Sink" is one of many peculiar holes to be found amid the Black Hills. It is a huge natural well, the depth of which cannot be seen from the top. One can look down into utter darkness as it seems from above, but nothing more is to be seen.

At times a mass of vapor will arise from the opening to this great sink, and this causes many people to believe that it conceals a boiling spring in its dark depths.

Dismal soon came in sight of this curiosity of nature, and then a cry burst from his lips.

Two men were struggling desperately on the very brink of the great hole.

Dan recognized them both.

"Great flutterin' flapjacks!" he cried. "It's them two double-an'-twisted frauds, Noel Kenyon an' Parson Perkins!"

The old Hills ranger spoke the truth.

And then, as he was gazing at them in surprise, both men seemed to lose their balance. A moment later they disappeared from sight into the darkness of the Devil's Sink!

"Sufferin' Sampson!" gasped Dan.

Then he ran swiftly forward and peered down into the black hole. Nothing but darkness and gloom rewarded his gaze, and no sound came up from the depths to tell what had been the fate of the two unfortunate men.

"Thet's ther last o' them!" whispered the old borderman, huskily.

CHAPTER XVI.

TOBY IN TROUBLE.

"Yes, thet's ther last o' them galoots," repeated Dismal Dan, as he continued to gaze into the forbidding depths of the Devil's Sink. "Their crooked careers hev cum ter an en' fer sure. Thar's no tellin' how deep this hoel is; p'r'aps they hain't struck bottom yit. Ther blamed thing's er steamin' now, so thet I can't see down ez fur ez usual. I sh'udn't wonder ef a feller c'd see ter ther bottom o' this hoel thet he'd look clean down inter ther pit below whar ther Old Boy hisself hangs out."

The old man drew back from the gloomy sink-hole with an involuntary shudder. It was not a pleasant place to contemplate.

"I don't keer 'bout takin' er tumble inter thet thar hoel," muttered Dan. "Prob'ly both them pore cusses are cooked to ther devil's sackerfaction by this time. They'd orter call thet place Satan's Stew Pan."

"Waal, one thing's sart'in: we needn't bother our heads 'bout ther Parson no more, fer ef he wuz Cap'n Hawk, he won't never bother us. His career ended in Satan's Sink. Ef he wuz ther robber chief, his men will look fer him in vain. He'll never rob ernother stage or swoop down on an emigrant train. I reckon ef ther truth wuz known, ther Hawks o' ther Black Hills are responsible fer menny a piece o' cussedness thet has bin laid ter ther reds."

"An' now I reckon I'll better face back torruds Wind Canyon. I hain't found ther boy, ter be shore, but I reckon ther lad 'll make his way roun' 'thout er guardeen. He hain't ther tenderfut w'at he wuz w'en I fu'st saw him. But I'm red dy ter bet thet he didn't ketch ther man he wuz arter, jest ther same."

The old man turned away from the spot, feeling certain that the two men who had fallen into Satan's Sink were beyond aid. As for Rifle Roy, the chances were that he would find him in Wind Canyon, for, failing in overtaking the man he was after, he would probably return to camp. This was the way Dan reasoned, and under ordinary circumstances, he would have been right.

But the adventures of the day were far from being ended, as the Range Tramp was soon to discover.

Dan was the possessor of a remarkably keen pair of eyes and he always used them to advantage. They were destined to serve him well that day.

Reaching the top of a wooded ridge, the old man paused to take a survey of his surroundings. He soon espied several figures which were moving along through a small ravine not far away.

"Pashent Job!" he muttered, as he stared intently at the party. "Them are reds, an' ef my ole eyes hain't crooked, they've got er pris'ner with them. P'r'aps it's ther lad!"

The idea was startling, to say the least. From his position Dan could not tell whether he was right or not.

"I'll be skinned ef I don't find out!" he declared, as the Indians disappeared with their prisoner amid the rocks and bushes.

The old Hills Ranger lost no time in hastening toward a place where he hoped to obtain a better view of the party. With remarkable swiftness, and at the same time with the silent tread of a cat, he glided forward to intercept the red-skins.

"I kin strike kiver whar they can't see me, an' I kin took in ther hull outfit," he said, mentally. "Sumbow I feel mighty sure thet they hev got sumbuddy in their dirty han's thet I know; an' ther chances are thet it's ther boy. Ef so, thar'll be sum dead reds afore I git dun with ther gang."

There was a look of determination on the old man's face that boded no good to the savages should he discover a friend in their power.

Finally he reached the place he was aiming for, and, as he had hoped, he got there in advance of the red skins. It took him but a moment to conceal himself, but he was none too soon.

"Hyet they cum!" he breathed.

A moment later five stalwart savages came into view and filed past the place where the old Range Tramp was concealed. And then Dan saw who their prisoner was.

Toby!

The darky had fallen into trouble in some way.

Dismal's eyes twinkled brightly as he peered forth from his place of concealment. He noted the look of utter despair that rested on the terrified negro's face, and made a silent vow to rescue him from his foes.

Onward up the defile passed the five Indians and their dark-faced prisoner.

"I reckon thar's bin er rucshun at ther camp," thought the hidden watcher. "But w'at's the cum o' Jack? P'r'aps ther 'tarnal varmints hev wiped him out!"

He waited until the red-skins had passed out of view and then silently arose and started on the trail.

"Ef they've laid out Jolly Jack, I shell not weep very bad ef I hev ter slaughter ther hull gang in order ter resky ther leetle nig," ran through Dismal's head. "I never did hev no

luv fer ther copper-skinned varmints, an' I hain't got no more now nor I useter hev; but I allus tried ter avoid sheddin' ther blood o' er booman critter w'en I c'd. I reckon, though, thet an Injun's 'bout ez fur down torruds ther animal line ez er booman kin descend. Leastwise ther most o' 'em be."

With the silent tread of a panther, the old man followed on the trail of the Indians, his senses keenly on the alert. The reds were pushing on into the heart of the Hills.

For two hours the tireless old trailer followed the unsuspecting red-men. It was mid-day when they halted.

"Wonder w'at they're stoppin' hyer fer?" muttered Dismal, as he crept forward so that he could obtain a view of the reds and remain unseen himself.

He saw that Toby was bound in a sitting posture with his back against a tree. His captors were lying around in various attitudes of lazy abandon.

"They're takin' cumfu't now," thought the unseen trailer; "but they know not the day nor the hour when deestruction will run slap up erg'in' 'em."

The old borderman lay in his place of concealment and revolved in his head several schemes whereby he could effect the darky's release, but none of them seemed to satisfy him. Finally a thought struck him.

"Great flutterin' flapjacks!" he breathed; "I beleve them varmints are waitin' fer more o' their kine as are ter meet 'em hyer!"

If this was true, Dan knew that the sooner he made a move toward rescuing the unlucky darky the better would be his chance for success. But he was puzzled to know just what to do.

"Blamed ef I don't beleve I kin salt ther hull gang with Leetle Paralyze," he thought, as he patted his reliable rifle in an affectionate manner. "An' I beleve I c'd do et afore enny o' them c'd jump ter kiver."

For a few moments the sad-looking old man considered this new plan, for he was not a man who did anything hastily. Dismal Dan was a peculiar person in more ways than one, but he was not a simpleton by any means.

"Reckon I've got ter do it," the old borderman finally muttered.

But then something happened that prevented him from carrying out his desperate determination. One of the Indians arose and started to advance directly toward the concealed white.

"Weepin' Isreel!" gasped Dismal. "Ther varmint's comin' hyer!"

Swiftly and silently the old borderman drew back and soon concealed himself in another place close to where he fancied the red-skin would pass, yet quite out of sight of the Indians lying on the ground near the captive darky.

"Ef I kin jest git one good grip on ther critter," thought Dan, "an' use my knife quick ernuff, he'll never tell his red pards how he guv' up ther ghost."

A long knife gleamed in Dismal's hand!

Onward came the unsuspecting red-skin, when, suddenly, with the leap of a panther, the veteran sprung upon the Sioux. Dan's empty hand closed on the red throat and then the terrible knife did its work. Not a cry or a sound told the stricken savage's companions of his fate. Dan only released the grasp on the red's neck when he was sure that the brave was past making an outcry.

"Thar," muttered the old man, with a shudder, "thet's er piece o' work w'at I don't like. I can't snuff out even er dirty red varmint, as most prob'ly hes murdered frum one ter er duzen whites, without it gives me ther squirms. They deserve ter be wiped frum ther face o' ther 'arth ther hull c' 'em, but thet don't meck me feel enny better w'en I hev ter down one. It's blamed bad t'isness!"

He dragged the body into the bushes, and then crept back where he could watch the dead Indian's companions.

"They'll be lookin' arter 'im w'en they find thet he don't cum back," decided the old ranger. "Then'll be ther time fer me ter git in sum more fine work."

Dan was right. It was not long before the four reds began to show signs of uneasiness. The Range Tramp knew that they were wondering what could detain the absent red.

"One o' 'em'll be cumin' ter look him up afore shortly," thought Dan.

He was correct, for in a few moments one of the Indians arose and started in the footsteps of the missing warrior.

Once more the silent slayer drew back to the second place of concealment and waited; and straight to the spot where his spirit would be sent to join that of his late comrade in the bappy hunting-grounds came the second red.

Then the red tragedy was repeated as silently as before!

"Thet mecks two on 'em," muttered Dan, as he pulled the Indian into the bushes and left him beside his comrade. "Ef I c'd jest take keer o' ther other two ez easy!"

Stealthily he crept back to the spot where he could watch the three survivors.

"I'm erfeered I sha'n't hev no sech good luck with them," he muttered.

Patiently he waited, knowing that the Indians would do something when they saw that their companions did not return.

After a time the three seemed to hold a consultation, and the watching white fancied that they were somewhat excited.

"They'll meek er move mighty suddint," was his decision.

A moment later two of them arose and started toward the spot where Dan still lay concealed.

"Sufferin' Sampson! W'at's ter be did?"

Only for a moment was the old ranger undecided, then his trusty Winchester came up to his shoulder.

"I kin drap 'em both," he decided. "Then I kin git in on ther last one afore he kin finish ther leetle nig."

When the two red-men had reached a certain point the rifle of the hidden white spoke. The foremost Indian threw up his hands and uttered a shriek as he went down. Like an echo to the first shot came the second, and the other red shared his companion's fate.

Then old Dan leaped out of his cover, and, with a terrible yell, made a dash for the spot where the surviving Sioux was guarding the unlucky Toby. But the surviving red did not wait for Dismal to come up. Instead of that, he turned and ran for life.

"Go it!" shouted the triumphant white, sending a bullet whistling past the fleeing Indian's ears. "Yer room's er blamed sight better than yer cumpany."

CHAPTER XVII.

A FLIGHT, CAPTURE, RESCUE, AND DISAPPEARANCE.

WITH her heart throbbing in her bosom as a newly-captured bird beats against the cruel prison-bars of his gilded cage, Hattie Holmes watched the madly struggling men on the jutting mountain-shelf. Again and again her white lips whispered a prayer that her handsome young rescuer might be the victor; but more than once it seemed that her supplication was useless.

"Oh, heavens! he will be killed!" she gasped. Then, seized by unreasoning terror, she turned and fled from the spot. She felt that to remain was to see her rescuer slain, and to again fall into the hands of the Hawks of the Gold Hills.

"I had rather perish amid the Hills," she told herself. "I had rather be slain by savages. Any fate is preferable to that which would probably befall me should I again become their captive."

Like a frightened fawn she fled down the steep. She did not seem to notice that at times the mountain-side seemed almost perpendicular. She did not pause when she came to the precipitous places, but in some wonderful manner she passed down over them uninjured. Had she not been controlled by a blind fear she would have shuddered to look down over some of the places where she did not check her flying feet in the least. It seemed that the hand of Providence must have preserved her.

Panting like a hunted animal, she reached the foot of the mountain; but she did not pause there. Onward she ran, occasionally casting fearful glances over her shoulder. She took no heed of the course she was pursuing, and did not pause until she fell to the ground in an exhausted condition.

How long she lay thus she did not know, but she was finally aroused by feeling a touch on her shoulder and hearing a strange guttural voice say:

"Ugh! White gal! Heap good!"

Then her eyes unclosed and she saw a dusky face bending over her. Uttering a cry of fear, she attempted to spring up, but for an instant her strength did not serve her. With a moan she sunk back.

The Indian warrior who had found her looked at her wonderingly, as if unable to comprehend the trouble.

"White gal hurt?" he questioned, not unkindly.

But Hattie was too frightened to reply just then. He seemed to understand her fear, for he said:

"Sky Eyes not be 'fraid; Soft Heart no hurt squaw. Him no fight squaws."

These words were reassuring, and Hattie gazed appealingly into her red captor's face. She was pleased to see a face that was far from forbidding. Indeed, Soft Heart, as the red had called himself, was rather an agreeable-looking Indian.

"Soft Heart no hurt," he repeated, as his eyes met hers.

Hattie tried to smile, but the attempt was wasted.

"Thank you, Soft Heart," she murmured. "You are kind."

Her words seemed to please the red-man, for his eyes twinkled brightly.

"Sky Eyes heap look fine," he declared, with undisguised admiration. "What ail Sky Eyes—hurt?"

"No, I am not hurt," she replied; "but I feel exhausted. I ran to escape foes."

A puzzled light crept into the Indian's eyes.

"Run—foes?" he repeated. "What for?"

She saw that he did not understand her.

"They would hurt me—the bad white men who wear masks to conceal their faces," explained the girl.

Soft Heart seemed to comprehend, for he nodded gravely.

"Ugh! Much bad men; hide faces. Bad men help Injuns fight whites who steal Injun's land, take him gold. Soft Heart not like 'um jes' same."

Hattie's spirits rose. Perhaps her captor was a friendly Indian.

"Does Soft Heart hate the whites?" she asked.

A dark look came over the red-man's face.

"Ugh! White man steal Injun's land; Soft Heart not like thief," was the reply.

The girl saw that, although the red-skin was not a common brutal warrior, he was far from being a friendly. Once more the unfortunate girl became depressed. She had escaped from Gold Hawks to fall into the clutch of a savage. Might it not be a case of "out of the frying-pan into the fire?"

Soft Heart watched her face a few moments, and then he asked:

"How came Sky Eyes here?"

"I have friends near."

"White gal friends—where?"

The red-skin seemed a trifle alarmed.

"Out on the plain. They camped there several nights ago, and while I slept, the bad men who hid their faces stole me from my father's side."

A strange look came over Soft Heart's face. He waved his hand toward the south.

"They camped there?" questioningly.

Hattie bowed.

For a moment the Indian turned away, as if to hide his face. Had he wished, Soft Heart could have told the girl of the fate that had befallen the emigrant train that would never reach its destination. But his lips remained closed.

"The bad white men took me to a cave not far from here," continued the girl. "A young man rescued me from their clutches; but he paid dearly for his act, for one of the bad men found him, and they fought. The bad man was larger and stronger and I knew that the one who saved me must die. I could not bear to see him slain, so I ran away, for I knew if I did not I should again fall into the hands of the bad men."

The red-skin listened attentively to this story, and when it was finished, he said:

"Sky Eyes not go to bad men more; her belong to Soft Heart now. Soft Heart no lose her."

A look of despair settled on Hattie's face.

"But I wish to go back to my father, Soft Heart," she said in a faltering voice. "I love him dearly, and he loves me. He will be crazy if I do not return to him."

Again the red turned away his face and was silent for several moments. Finally he turned to her to say:

"Sky Eyes face heap good; her voice like the voice of a brook. Her face am on Injun's heart; her voice he hear in him head when Sky Eyes tongue am silent. Soft Heart love Sky Eyes."

She drew back with a shudder, for she feared his love more than his hatred. He saw the movement and a change came over his face.

"Sky Eyes be not 'fraid; Soft Heart not hurt. He want white gal in wigwam. She not love him—eh?"

Hattie shook her head.

"No, no, Soft Heart! I love no one but my father."

But as she spoke the face of the handsome youth who had rescued her from the Hawks' Den seemed to rise up before her.

The Indian looked disappointed.

"You must let me go back to my father, Soft Heart," she said, pleadingly.

"What if white gal not find him?"

"But I must find him some way."

"Maybe can't."

"I will take my chances. You will let me go, won't you, Soft Heart?"

She laid her hand lightly on his arm. He started back and quickly shook it off, a burning light in his dark eyes.

"Sky Eyes not touch Soft Heart," he breathed, almost hoarsely. "It make him blood like fire, but Sky Eyes not love Injun."

There was a touch of despair in his voice that thrilled the girl's heart. She could not help wondering what manner of red-skin he was, for he seemed not at all like the Indian that her fancy had painted. She knew not that she had met a *rara avis*.

For a few moments the red-man and the white girl were silent. Finally Soft Heart said:

"Sky Eyes come with Injun."

"Where would you take me, Soft Heart?"

"Soft Heart not know. Him friends wait for him."

"But I am afraid of your friends."

"They not hurt Sky Eyes. Soft Heart take care."

"But I do not want to go with you. I want to find my father."

"Sky Eyes had not father she go with Injun?"

Hattie shook her head.

"I would go to my people."

For a moment the red-skin stared straight at

the ground. When he looked up, his lips parted to say:

"Mebbe white gal love Soft Heart soon."

Hattie did her best to convince the red wooer that such a thing was quite impossible, but she saw that after all she said, a hope still lingered in his breast. Soft Heart declared that she must go with him, and after a time she was forced to yield.

"Sky Eyes perish alone in Hills if Soft Heart left her," was the Indian's argument.

For nearly an hour they tramped steadily onward, the girl downcast and silent.

Suddenly two forms stepped into their path and confronted them.

"Sufferin' Sampson! Soft Heart, ole man, w'at hev ye thar?"

The speaker was Dismal Dan, and just behind the old Range Tramp stood the lately rescued Toby, his eyes rolling and his teeth exposed in a terrified grin.

The Indian halted in surprise and seemed undecided what move to make.

Hattie gave a cry of joy and sprung to the old man's side. She saw in an instant by his face that he was to be trusted.

"Oh, sir! you will take me to my father? You will not let Soft Heart carry me to his people?" she panted.

"Waal, ye may count on yer Uncle Dan," was the reassuring answer. "We'll kinder tork it over with ther red."

Soft Heart had folded his arms and stood gazing silently at the old borderman.

"W'at erbout this hyar bisness, Injun?" demanded Dan.

"Sky Eyes tell," was the calm answer.

It did not take Dan long to learn the truth from Hattie's lips. The girl gave the red-skin credit for treating her with greater respect than she had dreamed of receiving at the hands of an Indian. The old Hills ranger's eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he listened to her story.

"Ther Creator made er mistake w'en he giv thet critter a red skin," said the borderman. "I know him o' ole, an' he's white ef his skin is off color."

Then the sad-looking man called Soft Heart aside and for a few moments they talked earnestly in low tones. Finally Soft Heart seemed to agree to something that Dan had said, for the strange Indian turned and looked at Hattie for a moment without uttering a word, then, with a slow, stately movement he raised his hand and made a kind of salute. An instant later he wheeled and disappeared from view.

Dismal Dan came back alone.

"I fixed him, easy," said the old borderman. "I saved Soft Heart's life once an' ther red hain't fergut it."

"Has he gone?" asked the girl.

"Yep. He hated ter guv ye up like sin, but, he dun it fer me. He is goin' ter meet sum fr'en's, but I sh'udn't wonder ef he wuz s'prised w'en he sees 'em. P'r'aps he'll feel like cumin' back an' callin' me ter a count."

A few moments later they were moving from the spot where the fortunate meeting had occurred.

Hattie told Dan of her adventures since she was kidnapped, and the old ranger became quite excited when she related how she was rescued from the Hawks' Den and described her rescuer.

"Pashent Job! thet must hev bin ther boy!" Dismal exclaimed. "Ef we don't find him at ther camp, I'll hump it this year way an' fine out w'at's becum o' him."

The girl's story showed Dan that Parson Perkins had told some truth in his story of the emigrant train.

It was a tiresome tramp back to Wind Canyon, but the gloomy gorge was reached at last. They finally approached the place where the young miners' camp had been. A glance told them that the tent had been torn down.

"Dar," cried Toby, "w'at I tole yo', Marser Danyill! Yo' kin see fo' yo'se'f dat dis nig done didn't lie. Marser Jack was gone an' I was dere all 'lone w'en dem Injins cum. I was snoozin', w'en fu'st t'ing I knowed suffin' grabbed me. Den I hollered an' der Injins hollered, an' den dey 'tar do'n de tent an' kerry me 'way. Dunno w'at dey'd hab dun wif me 'f 't'adn't bin fo' yo', 'deed I don'."

Dan regarded the ruins of the tent with some perplexity.

"It's sart'in thet ther boys hain't cum back," he muttered. "I dunno jest w'at ter do."

After several moments of hard thinking, Dan turned to his companions and said:

"It looks like ther Ole Boy wuz ter pay. I can't jest git it through my head w'at ter do, but I hev decided ter take er leetle look eroun'. O' course both o' you can't go with me, an' so ther best thing is fer you ter stay rite hyer. I'll fine ye er place o' concealment, an' you must stay rite thar till I git back."

Ten minutes later the old Range Tramp left them, with an injunction to surely remain where they were till he returned.

"I'll shorely cum back afore night," he declared.

Two hours later he returned, to find both the darky and the girl missing. They were gone, and nothing left behind told whither they had vanished.

CHAPTER XVII.

JOLLY JACK SOLVES A MYSTERY.

JOLLY JACK DILLON could not banish from his mind all thoughts of the strange and beautiful girl who had appeared to him in the night, and who had vanished into the air in a most mysterious manner while he was watching her. The more he thought of the remarkable occurrence, the more puzzled he became.

"I am going to investigate this locality," he said to himself. "If such a thing is possible, I will solve this mystery."

When Dan and Roy had left the canyon, Jack and Toby threw themselves down in front of the tent. Toby was inclined to be a little lazy from natural causes, but Jack wanted a chance to ponder on the little mystery which was giving him so much trouble.

As he lay on one side gazing toward the spot where he had last seen the beautiful unknown, he happened to raise his eyes to the jutting cliff, the dark shadow of which had hidden the girl from view as she arose into the air. A thought seemed to suddenly flash through his brain.

"I wonder what there is up there?" he muttered.

After a time he added:

"I'm going to know."

Having thus decided, he quietly arose and made preparations for the undertaking. He did not arouse Toby—who had fallen fast asleep—until he was ready to depart. Then he shook the little dorky and managed to make him understand that he was going somewhere. This was about all he succeeded in doing, for Toby was fast asleep again before Jack got a dozen rods from the spot.

It was more than an hour—nearly two—after Jack left the negro lad sleeping in front of the tent that the young miner appeared on a ledge directly above the cliff that he wished to reach. He had found it a very difficult job to get there, but Jack was one of the fellows who seldom turn back from an undertaking once determined upon.

"Now," he muttered, "to take a peep down at the shelf below."

In a moment he was lying upon his stomach, peering over the edge of the narrow ledge he was on. A low cry of astonishment came from his lips.

"Great Christopher!"

What he saw was well calculated to cause surprise.

The cliff was much wider than it appeared from below and seemed to extend back into the canyon wall. Directly below the shelf that Jolly Jack was on, the wall sloped backward, as if an immense sugar scoop had been plunged downward into the wall at an angle of nearly 45 degrees until it was on a level with the top of the cliff, and then the entire mass of rock and earth had been removed.

Back in the furthestmost recess of this strange place stood a small cabin, planted firmly against the wall.

From below it seemed that the entire cliff was covered by a mass of bushes and small trees; but in truth, only that part which projected beyond the face of the wall bore the growth of bushes. These aided in concealing the cabin from view, so that it was not apt to be seen from any other place than that where Jack lay.

"Great Jemima!" laughed the young man. "I have discovered a strange nest, I declare! I begin to see through the mystery now. People live on that cliff, and they have a way of descending into the canyon from it. I have seen one of the inhabitants go up. But, how was it done?"

This was a poser.

"She did not seem to make an effort, yet she sailed up into the air as easily as you please. I'm willing to bet that the trick was done with some kind of an arrangement worked from above. All she had to do was step in, give the signal, and up she went."

For a long time the young miner lay looking down at the cliff below and the strange little cabin against the wall. The door of the cabin was open, but there was not a sign of life about the place.

"It don't look as if there was any one at home," said Jack. "If I was sure there was no one at home, I would go down and examine the place just to see what it is like."

Jack was of an inquisitive turn and the longer he considered the matter the greater became his desire to descend to the cliff. Ere leaving the camp he had provided himself with a long lasso, thinking that he might need it for the very purpose that he was now contemplating.

After a time he decided to go down.

"I am going to look the place over," he said. "I reckon Jack Dillon can look out for number one. Perhaps I shall find the strange girl down there."

It was a hope that he might find the beautiful unknown that was his principal incitant in the move that he was about to make. Jack was a trifle bewitched by Toby's "spookness."

He soon found a place to make one end of the lasso fast, and let the other fall over the edge of the shelf he was on. Then he lay down and peered over once more.

"Plenty long and some to spare," he laughed. A moment later his jacket was off and placed under the rope so that it would not wear on the sharp edge of the shelf.

"Now I'm going down."

Then the daring fellow swung himself over the edge.

Jack was as spry and stout as a sailor, and he found it a pleasure to slide gracefully down to the cliff below.

"Well, here I am," he thought, as his feet touched the ground. "I may not find it so easy getting out."

Jack was destined to get into trouble of which he did not dream.

After pausing to look around a moment, he advanced boldly toward the open door of the cabin.

"I'm going to have a peep within," he declared, softly, as he felt to make sure that his revolver was convenient to his hand. "I may need a shooting-iron. My rifle is on the shelf above, but I reckon revolver will fill the bill."

He reached the door and a mingled exclamation of both surprise and satisfaction fell from his lips, but it was so subdued that it did not awaken a person who lay sleeping on a couch within the cabin.

It was the strange girl of the two midnight visitations!

"My stars!" thought the bold youth at the cabin door; "but she's just as beautiful as she looked to be by moonlight."

The sleeping girl was indeed fair to look upon. It was little wonder that the young miner was fascinated by her rare loveliness.

Jack watched her, spellbound.

"I will go away before she awakes," he told himself. "She shall not see me here. I am well rewarded for my pains, but I would give something for a peep at the midnight eyes which I know are concealed by those dark lashes."

His desire was gratified, for suddenly the lashes lifted and the dark eyes looked straight at him. In a moment their owner sprung up with a startled cry.

"Thunder!" thought the young man; "I'm caught now!"

For a moment he was at a loss what to do. He saw that the girl was much alarmed, but she seemed to be the first to recover the power of speech.

"Oh! what made you come here?" she cried. "I feared you would! You must go away before father returns!"

Jack instantly noted that she seemed more alarmed for his safety than for anything else.

"I hope you will pardon my intrusion," he said, gallantly removing his hat and advancing a step. "My curiosity got the best of me and I resolved to have a look at our spirit by daylight. When I saw you sleeping there I decided to go away before you awoke; but you opened your eyes when I least expected such a thing. Now that you have seen me here, I hope you will forgive me for coming."

"Yes, yes!" she exclaimed. "But, you must go at once. If father found you here, something terrible would happen! Go!"

"I will go at once—because you wish me to." But it was too late!

A heavy step sounded behind the girl and a tall, bearded, white-haired old man sprung past her to seize the venturesome young miner.

"Hal! hal! ha!" laughed a blood-chilling voice. "So you found my last retreat, did you? Well, you shall never tell the secret to my foes! Within a minute you die!"

The face of the wild-looking old man was contorted with rage, and his eyes gleamed with a deadly light. His left hand clutched Jolly Jack's throat and his right raised a long glistening knife aloft.

The young miner was face to face with death.

CHAPTER XIX.

HELD UP BY THE GOLD HAWKS.

In an instant Roy Raymond's rifle leaped to his shoulder and his voice rung out sharply:

"Halt there!"

With one accord, the six horsemen drew up. They were the survivors from the ill-fated wagon-train.

"Hello!" grunted Old Hasty. "W'at hev we hyer? Looks like we'd struck er hooman critter."

"Waal," drawled 'Bijah Bigfist, "I'm 'feered ef he takes you fer a sample, he'll think this crowd er pack o' jackasses."

"Thar, thar, 'Bijah!" snapped the little Californian; "you tork too much. Ef you'd jest keep that thar mouth o' yourn shet er leetle more, people'd never know w'at er blamed fool you be. Wal, youngster, w'at's wanted?"

"What party is that?" asked Roy.

"We're hones' men," was the reply, "an' hope you are ther same."

Roy regarded them critically for a moment. 'Bijah appeared a trifle uneasy.

"Say, lad," he finally called, "don't take this hyer leetle runt fer a sample o' ther hull crowd, fer ef ye do, ye'll be shore ter form er mighty pore 'pinion o' us."

"I'll pay you fer that!" muttered Old Hasty.

"Never mine enny pay jest now, pard," laughed the big miner. "I know ye'r' clean

bu'sted an' lookin' fur sumbuddy ter give ye er grub-stake, but I won't say er word erbout it ter a livin' soul."

"Where are you from?" questioned the youth with the rifle.

"Frum all over ther kentry," was the reply. "We belonged ter an emmygrant train w'at ther reds wiped out night afore last."

"And you escaped?"

"We did, 'ca'se we didn't happen ter be with ther train at that time."

Roy lowered his rifle.

"You appear like honest men," he said.

"Thank beaving!" grunted 'Bijah; "he bain't bin lookin' at Ole Quickness a tall."

Roy came forward.

"There are so many ruffians and bloodthirsty red-skins in these Hills, that it is a surprise to see six honest-appearing men in one party," he said.

'Bijah Bigfist leaned toward Old Hasty and whispered hoarsely:

"Get behind me, you little runt, an' he won't see you. Do you want ter spile ther good impression we've made?"

The little '49er waved his hand toward his big pard.

"You mustn't injine him," he said, apologetically. "He bain't mor'n hafe fool, an' he won't steal—w'en he thinks ennyone's watchin' him."

The young miner could not repress a smile, for he saw that the two singular pards were inclined to be a little "cranky."

"Which way are you moving?" questioned the youth.

"Wal, thet depen's. We've lost our guide, an' we are er bit at sea jest now. Per'aps you kin help us out."

"Possibly."

"We're huntin' fer ther Den o' er gang o' measly varmints as are known as ther Hawks o' ther Black Hills."

Roy started.

"Perhaps I can guide you to the place," he said.

In an instant Martin Holmes was excited.

"If you can do that, you shall be well paid!" he cried.

"I am not inclined to ask pay for such services," was the quiet response.

"But if you can guide us there, your aid will be of untold value to me."

"I think I can guide you there, but I shall not be able to do so till I find a person for whom I am searching."

"But I cannot wait!" panted the excited man. "I must go to the Den of that infamous band of kidnappers at once."

Roy caught at his words.

"Kidnappers did you say?"

"Yes; they stole my child—my darling daughter—from my side. But I will wrest her from their grasp or lose my life in the attempt!"

In an instant Rifle Roy knew who it was that he had drawn up from the mouth of the mountain cave.

"Sir," said the young man, "I do not think that your daughter is in the power of the Gold Hawks now."

"What do you mean?"

"I think that your daughter is the very person that I am searching for."

"Why, how can that be?"

Martin Holmes leaned forward and grasped the young man by the arm, his whole body atremble with eager excitement. His breath came in short, panting gasps and his lips fluttered with each inhalation. His emotion was painful to witness.

As briefly and plainly as possible, Roy told them the story of his adventures up to the time that he fell unconscious at the foot of the mountain after his battle with the masked man. The entire party were eager listeners to his story. When he had finished, Holmes asked him to describe the girl, and he did so as nearly as he could.

"Yes, yes!" panted the distressed parent; "that was my child—my darling Hattie!"

"That was Leetle Blue Eyes shore's shootin'," nodded 'Bijah.

"And you say that she is at liberty, wandering through these hills?"

"Unless she has been captured since my battle with the outlaw on the mountain-side," was the reply.

"Then we will find her. You shall be rewarded for your heroism, young man."

"Don't talk of that, I will not take any reward!"

"That's ther kind o' stuff!" muttered Big 'Bijah, approvingly. "He's er lad after my own heart."

"He'd find it er wu'thless piece o' property arter he got it," observed the '49er.

Arrangements were soon made for Roy to guide the party toward the spot where he thought it probable that the lost girl might be found. Old Hasty offered him a place on his horse, but the young man did not accept, for he said that he could travel on foot as fast as they would wish to get over the ground. He told them of the peculiar walking trance that had overcome him after he fell unconscious at the foot of the mountain where he believed the cave of the Gold Hawks was located, and explained that for that reason he might not be able to

lead them directly back over the course he had come.

"But that will make little difference," he said, "for I am quite sure that I saw nothing of the young lady after the battle on the mountain. We are as apt to find her if we do not return the way I came as we would be to go directly back over the path that I trod."

And so, with Roy in advance a foot, the party started.

Old Hasty had been watching the young man's face quite closely and had observed a dazed light that came into his eyes once or twice. The old 49er now touched 'Bijah's arm and the two peculiar pards fell back a little.

"What is it, ole man?" the big Californian asked, for he had seen that Hasty wished to say something to him.

"Ther boy."

"Waal, w'at erbout him?"

"He hain't jest right."

"How do you mean? Do you think he's bin torkin' crooked?"

"No."

"W'at then?"

"Wal, I kinder kalkerlate thet ther lad hain't got over ther 'fects o' thet tussil yit."

"W'at d'yer mean?"

"I mean thet he looks kinder dazed like."

"I notissed it onet."

"Ther chances are thet he won't be able ter lead us back ter ther place whar he hed ther tussil with ther masked galoot. He can't find ther way."

'Bijah looked sober.

"I belevee you're right," he finally admitted.

And the old miner was, as subsequent events proved.

An hour later Roy turned to the men he was guiding, a look of dismay on his handsome face. "Gentlemen," he said, "I have lost my bearings."

A consultation ensued. Roy explained that, until a short time before, he had felt that he was following the right course, but now he knew not which way to turn.

This information affected Martin Holmes more than any of the others. The distressed parent wrung his hands in a helpless manner that was pitiful to witness.

"Oh, my poor child!" was all he could say.

Big 'Bijah laid his broad hand gently on the tortured man's arm and said, reassuringly:

"Don't you worry, Holmes; we're goin' ter find thet gal. I reckon she's considerably better orf than she w'd be in ther hands o' them durned Hawks."

"An' 'tain't more'n hafe likely as we'd fine her back thar nigh ther varmints' Den," put in Old Hasty. "She'd be shore ter git as fur erway from ther place as she c'd. We're ap'ter run onter her 'most anywhar."

The words of the two old Californians cheered Holmes in a measure.

"We may as well preambulate erlong," said 'Bijah, cheerfully. "Ef we keep sturrin' we may cum encross ther leetle 'un 'most enny time."

And so the party started onward again.

But they did not go far before out before them rode a dozen horsemen whose faces were concealed by black masks! Up to the shoulders of the masked horsemen rose as many cocked rifles, leveled straight at the seven men they confronted.

Then came the stern command:

"Halt! Stop where you are!"

"Great Jeeroosalem!" gasped 'Bijah Bigfist. "Ther Gold Hawks thei'selves!"

CHAPTER XX.

CAPTAIN HAWK UTTERS A WARNING.

THE Gold Hawks!

A dreaded band of desperadoes—robbers and cut-throats—who were the perpetrators of a hundred dastardly crimes. Hand-and-glove with the bloodthirsty red-skins, they preyed on those of their own color, and did not hesitate to shed blood when such an act would serve to forward their own evil schemes. They were the outcasts and criminals of a dozen States.

Their chief was a man of mystery, for it was said that no one—not even his own lawless followers—had seen him in his true character since the dastardly band was organized. He was an adept in the matter of disguises, and although he had been exposed in several, he had always escaped capture, and never again had he appeared as that character.

But when he was once unmasked, no one knew what guise he would next assume. He seemed able to play any part so skillfully that detection was almost an impossibility.

Captain Hawk, the Crafty, led the band of masked men who confronted the survivors of the emigrant-train. He was attired in black from head to foot and his face was concealed by a black mask. The handsome stallion he bestrode was also coal-black.

"Hold up a little, gentlemen," cried Captain Hawk, in a clear voice. "We want to talk with you a little."

'Bijah Bigfist was the first to regain his composure. He touched Old Hasty on the arm, saying grimly:

"They're arter recroots. Yer face has gin ye erway, ole man, an' you've got ter go."

"Oh, do dry up!" snapped the little Californian.

"Waal, I hope ye will let me weep er few," persisted the big miner, "fer I actually hate ter part with ye. But ye kerry ther sign on yer face an' you might 'a' knowed thet yer sins w'd fine ye out. Good-by, pard. W'en ye git ter robbin' stages, think o' me an' steal er big gold watch an' sparkler fer me ter w'ar arter I j'ine ther church an' git ter slingin' Gospil."

'Bijah brushed away an imaginary tear and gave Old Hasty a look of affectionate regret that would have been highly amusing to the entire party at almost any other time. As it was, it only elicited a sharp order from the robber chief:

"Careful with your hands there, you big galoot! If you try anything crooked, you'll eat lead in an instant!"

But 'Bijah did not seem much alarmed.

"Referrin' ter me, pard?" he questioned.

"You've guessed it first time."

"Waal, you needn't worry er bit. I'm jest as docile as er lamb, an' as stiddy as an ole hoss."

"You will all notice, gentlemen," continued the smooth-tongued outlaw, "that these boys of mine have the drop. I wish to impress the fact on your mind so that any little trouble may be avoided."

"D'yer think we hain't got no eyes?" grunted Old Hasty.

"It's not your eyes that I fear, but your judgment. And I am speaking for your own good."

"Your kin'ness is distressin'," observed 'Bijah, solemnly.

"And you talk too much for your size, which is saying considerable."

"Thar, thar!" chuckled the 49er; "how menny times hev I tole you thet? W'y, ye see this year gent in black agrees with me puffedly."

"Which illustrates ther fac' thet like mines run in ther same channel," drawled the big miner, smiling in a way that showed he thought himself more than even with his little pard.

Captain Hawk cut in sharply:

"Enough cheap talk, gentlemen. I am here for business. It will not be an easy thing for my men to hold their rifles to their shoulders, but when I tell you that every one of them can drive nails with their guns at their sides, you will understand that a crooked move on your part means shoot, and shoot means hit. I am not going to order you to hold up your hands, as I would was your party larger or mine smaller, but I am going to say that if any of you are in haste to shuffle off this mortal coil, just reach for a gun!"

Then the desperado chief made a motion with his hand, and his men lowered their rifles, but held them at their sides, still cocked, and with the muzzles bearing full upon the emigrants.

"Now, gentlemen," continued Captain Hawk, "I have a question to ask: Why are you here, and what do you want?"

Martin Holmes found his tongue.

"You know well enough why we are here!" he cried, hoarsely. "Villain! wretch! two-faced traitor! where is my child?"

"Stop him!" spluttered Old Hasty to 'Bijah.

"Blame ther durned luck! he'll make a mess!"

The old 49er spoke just loud enough for the big Californian to understand his words, but the robber chief caught the meaning just the same.

"Don't try to check the old man," he laughed. "He will talk to the point, while you are beating round the bush. I admire these people who say what they mean and mean what they say. Give the old gent free rein."

"Where is my child?" repeated Martin Holmes, excitedly. "What have you done with her, you treacherous whelp? I know you, though your face is hidden! You are—"

"Shet him up, 'Bijah, you slow fool!" commanded Old Hasty, almost leaping from his horse in his excitement.

But the big Californian's broad hand had already closed over the enraged parent's lips.

"Go a leetle slow, Holmes," advised 'Bijah, in a low tone. "You'll git yerself an' ther hull o' us inter er peck o' trubble ef ye let on thet you know thet critter. I reckon we all ketch ther game as he played, but it w'dn't be jest ther thing ter whoop it right out loud jest now."

Bigfist's calm words cooled the excited man in a measure.

Captain Hawk laughed again.

"I reckon there are cobwebs in the old man's upper story," he sneered. "What is he firing at anyway?"

Both Old Hasty and 'Bijah pretended not to hear the question.

"A little loud of hearing at times, eh, gents?" smiled the cool outlaw. "Well, I notice we are all liable to be taken in that way occasionally. It save lots of trouble answering questions. But you may find it the best thing to do to answer when Captain Hawk talks with his boys at his back."

The speaker paused as if to note the effect of his words, and then he repeated the question asked once before:

"Why are you here and what do you want?"

"Thet hain't none o' your durned business!" flashed the 49er.

"Then I will make it my business. Captain Hawk has a way of making certain things his business if he happens to be interested in them."

"You are welcome ter all you'll fine out from this crowd."

"Well, if you don't feel like talking, I won't crowd you to-night. I am in an unusually soft mood. I didn't know but you would be willing to tell me what brought you into these parts."

"I s'pose we hev er right ter go whar we durned please, hain't we?" snapped Old Hasty.

"Well, that depends. You may have a right to prow round these parts, but let me tell you, it's durned dangerous. I just want to give you folks a little warning. That is why I stopped you."

"How kind!" said 'Bijah, sarcastically.

"Yes," continued the outlaw, "it was for the purpose of warning you that I stopped you. This locality is very unsafe. You are apt to run across snags round here almost anywhere. In fact, if you have any great desire to continue to exist, you had better turn back."

"Why, how you tork!" drawled the big Californian.

"You have got to turn back now; not a step further can you go."

"What will hinder us?" demanded Roy, who to this point had not spoken since the appearance of the Hawks.

Captain Hawk gave the young miner a look through the twin holes in his dark mask.

"Without doubt you have heard of me," he said, icily.

"We never heerd no good o' ye," grunted the little 49er.

"At the same time, you may have heard that I am a man who always keeps his word. If I have no other virtue, I never go back on my word. I wish to impress this on your minds, for if you remember it, the memory may save your lives."

"How can we thank you?" drawled Big 'Bijah.

"You will heed my warning," pursued the robber chief, calmly. "It will be for your interests to do so. Captain Hawk says: Turn back! If you do not heed this warning, your bones shall rot amid these Hills! This is no idle threat."

By report the comrades knew the nature of the man before them. They did not doubt that he would destroy the entire party should he feel inclined to do so.

"I have nothing further to say," continued Captain Hawk. "You will now turn squarely about and meander peacefully away. If you feel inclined to kick against the mandate, just kick and we will send the whole mees of you to Kingdom Come in an instant!"

What was to be done? There was but one thing that could be done. The outlaw held the winning cards just then, and they must submit to his command.

Old Hasty could not refrain from giving vent to his disgust.

"It's jest er dod-rotted shame!" he snapped.

"This hyer's er free kentry. Burned ef it don't cut me all up!"

But a minute later the little party was moving back over the path that it had once traveled. As silent as statues, the Gold Hawks watched them till they were out of sight.

Old Hasty was furious. He relieved his feelings by swearing in a way that surprised his companions and caused 'Bijah Bigfist to smile lazily. The little 49er caught a glimpse of the smile on 'Bijah's face, and then the quick-tempered miner turned on his big pard. The way Old Hasty abused the good-natured fellow was a caution; and through it all 'Bijah smiled as serenely as ever. When the fiery little fellow had finished, the big miner turned to one of the party and asked him if he had seen anything of "Old Quickness."

"But what can we do now?" asked Holmes. "Surely we will not go away and leave Hattie to perish?"

After a few moments of earnest talk, they decided to go back toward Wind Canyon and see if they could find anything of Old Dismal, of whom Roy told them. They fancied that the veteran borderman would now be an invaluable addition to their party.

And at the entrance to the weird gorge of the Black Hills they met the Range Tramp, who told them a story that both cheered and alarmed Martin Holmes. Cheered him when he learned that his daughter had not again fallen into the hands of the Gold Hawks, and alarmed him when he heard of her singular disappearance.

CHAPTER XXI.

NEBRASKA NAT REAPPEARS.

It was not long after Dismal Dan left Tobias Tadback and Hattie Holmes together in a secluded spot near the ruins of the camp in Wind Canyon, that the negro discovered that he was hungry.

"By Jinks, missy!" he exclaimed, as his eyes rolled in a comical look of distress, "my stomach"

feels kinder lonesum—it jest do! Rehum jest a bit ob fodder wo'dn't be no great hurt 'bout dis year time ob day. It don' gree wid dis chile ter go widout his rag'ler feed."

Hattie was amused by the comical little fellow's words and actions, and Toby joined heartily in her merry laugh.

"Kinder funny how a coon's put up roun' his interior regum," he observed, sagely. "W'en he gits use' ter er fing, he's shore ter want it 'bout so often. I spec's ef a chile nebber got use' ter feedin', he'd nebber want ter be chawin' at suffin' all de time. Dat wo'd meck er great sabin' ob hash."

"But a person cannot live without eating, Toby," smiled the girl. "We would die if we did not eat."

"Spec' we wo'd, missy, fer a fac'; but if we'd nebber larnt how ter eat, we might git 'long. It am defful foolis' ter larn er chile ter allus hab suffin' 'tween its teeth. Eatin's w'at mecks de culled peoples pore. If dey didn't hab ter eat dey wo'dn't hab ter wo'k, an' dat wo'd be scrumyshus."

"I see you are a philosopher, Toby."

"Er pillsofjum—w'at's dat? Kinder guess I nebber run 'crost dat wo'd in de co'se ob my obserwashun. Don' s'pos' it am ennyfing low down, lek er chickin-feef, am it? Ye wo'dn't call me dat, wo'd yo', missy?"

Toby was as sober as a judge, and his peculiar expressions were amusing in the extreme. It was well for Hattie that the little ducky was the possessor of a jolly disposition, for his queer talk took her thoughts from her own troubles, and made her forget her situation. He seemed quite pleased when she explained to him the meaning of the word philosopher.

"By golly!" he snickered; "I'll be finkin, dat I do know suffin' bymby. Dey useter took Tobe fo' a fool, but p'r'aps dey'll fine out dat he am a pillsofjum 'fore long. 'Most enny-buddy can be er fool, but I rehum dey can't all be pillsofjum."

Toby seemed to assume considerable dignity now that he fancied some one considered him of some importance. Hattie watched him swell with an assumed pompousness that caused her eyes to twinkle merrily. For a time Toby forgot his hunger.

"Jimcracks!" laughed the little ducky; "I'se jest gwan ter tole Mawser Roy w'at yo' sed. Guess he'll bergun ter fink I 'mount ter suffin' arter dat. But, by Jinks! I mos' fo'git dat I'se hongry."

"I am afraid it will not do you much good to remember it, Toby," said the girl.

"Dunno 'bout dat. Dere wuz som'fin' ter eat 'roun' dat ole tent w'en I lef' it in cump'ny wif dem Injunes, an' p'r'ap' de remains can be foun' now. Am yo' hongry, missy?"

"Well," confessed Hattie, "I would not object to something to eat."

"Den, by golly! I'se gwan ter meck er raid on dat dar tent. I don' beleebe Mawser Danyil 'spected us ter stay right beah widout movin' 'tall. Dar may be suffin' roun' dat tent, fo' I don' fink dat dem Injunes et de hull we had fo' ter keep oursel's frum starbin'."

At first Hattie attempted to convince Toby that he had better remain where he was and not venture out to the tent, but the comical look of distress that settled on his face was enough to have won a harder heart than hers.

"Go'-by, missus," he murmured. "Dis'll be de en' ob Tobe. I can't lib widout eatin' 'cause I nebber larned how. Tell Mawser Danyil I died from 'feeshun ob de interior regum. Hab me burried in a quiet spot whey de birds will sin' ober my grabe an' de lon' green grass will meck er go' place fo' de cattypillars an' de spiders ter hide."

Then he lay back and closed his eyes with a look of resignation that caused the girl to laugh again. When her merriment had continued unabated for several seconds, he slowly opened his eyes and said:

"If yo' don' stop laffin' I'll git mad an' 'fuse ter starbe ter deff. How yo' s'pose er nig's gwan ter die w'en de mo'ner's laffin'?"

Hattie finally consented for him to go out and see if he could find anything of the food which he declared was in the tent when the red-skins found him sleeping in front of it; but she made him promise not to go further than the tent and to return at once. The thought of being left without even the company of a timid negro was terrifying.

Toby scudded away in a hurry, and it was not long before he returned with both hands full of food.

"Foun' it un'er de tent," he laughed. "Dem red boys took all dey wanted an' lef' de res'. By Jinks! won't we jest stuff oursel's! Well, I sho'd coff off er toenail!"

Hattie was glad that he had been successful in his search, for, to tell the truth, she was very hungry herself and 'most anything would be acceptable in the way of food. She welcomed the little fellow back with a bright smile.

"So you found what you went after did you, Toby? If you have no objections, I will help you dispose of a part of that."

"Hab enny 'jectuns—w'at yo' took me fer! I was finkin' ob yo' all de time w'en I wanted to git de fodder. I knowed yo' mus' be defful hon-

gry, dough yo' didn't say much 'bout it. I don' beleebe Tobe's er hog if he am brack."

And she foundt hat the ducky was really a generous, free-hearted boy who was ready to make almost any sacrifice for her. She began to realize that there was much more manhood in the young negro's soul than in that of many a white who would not stoop to wipe his feet on Toby's clothes.

"By jimcracks!" grinned Hattie's companion, as they satisfied their hunger; "tork 'bout feelin' good—lawsy me!—w'en do er pusson feel better dan jest arter eatin'?"

"You see you would miss all that if you had never learned to eat," smiled the girl.

"Dat's er fac'," he admitted, soberly. "I nebber fort ob dat befo'."

After they had eaten all they wanted, Toby proposed that he go and find some kind of a dish in which he could bring Hattie some water from the little brook. She consented to this, for she was quite thirsty. Again the little ducky darted away.

But he did not return with the dipper, although he came back in a hurry. He was trembling with fright and his face looked almost white despite its natural color. Hattie saw that there was some cause for alarm, and she sprung to her feet, demanding:

"What is it, Toby?"

"Injunes!" he gasped. "No, 'tain't dat! It am er w'ite man, wif w'ite ha'r an' de dreffules' lookin' eyes! Mawser Roy say fo' me ter keep 'way from him, fo' he kill me shore. We can't stay beah; he'd be shore ter fin' us an' he'd kill yo' too. Com' away, missy, quick!"

Toby's terror was contagious. Perhaps the man was one of the Gold Hawks looking for their recent captive!

Then they grasped each other's hand and ran swiftly from the spot. Once started, they did not dare to stop anywhere in that vicinity. They forgot Dismal Dan's injunction not to move away from the place where he left them, and hurried on until they were beyond the limits of Wind Canyon. At last Hattie sunk down exhausted.

"I can go no further!" she gasped.

"Well, I'se pritty well win'ed mysef'," admitted Toby, as he flung himself on the ground.

"But we ain't cotched, am we, missy?"

For a long time they lay there, neither uttering a word. Finally, the little ducky discovered that his companion was weeping. In a moment Toby became all sympathy.

"W'at de matter, missy?" he asked, softly. "W'at fo' yo' cryin', chile? I don' lek ter see yo' sp'ile dem bright eyes ob yo'n in dat way. Please don' cry, missy—please don't! It j-s' meck dis nig feel skurus roun' de chis'. If yo' don' stop, I'se gwan ter blubber, shore."

And when he found that his words did not soothe her, the tears began to roll slowly down his dark cheeks, and unconsciously he moved a little nearer her. But he did not attempt to comfort her again by words.

After a time Hattie became aware that the little ducky was weeping, and this drew her thoughts from herself and her troubles. She had not understood Toby's words, although she had heard them, but now she realized that he was weeping because she felt bad. Such sympathy was not to be despised.

"Toby," she said, in a low tone.

He looked up and perceived that her tears had ceased. In a moment the shadows on his face gave way to a look of pleasure.

"Oh, missy! don' yo' cry no mo', will yo'?" he exclaimed.

She smiled and shook her head.

"No more at present, Toby," she said. "But what were you crying for?"

"Rehum 'cause I co'dn't holt it," he replied, frankly. "It jest made me cry ter see yo'."

"You are very good, Toby, and I appreciate your sympathy. But you must know that girls cry about nothing sometimes, and cannot help it."

Toby thought that was singular, but refrained from saying so. For some time they sat there talking, undecided which way to move. Both of them feared to go back into Wind Canyon. Had they known it, the best thing they could have done was to remain right where they were. Dismal Dan would have found them. But after a time, they decided to move along, hoping to find Jack or Roy.

The sun that crept slowly down toward the western peaks saw a little ducky and a white girl wandering aimlessly through the Hills.

Hattie was a girl of peculiar loveliness, and the brief spell of weeping seemed much like an April shower which leaves the earth smiling when it has passed. Her face was a singularly attractive one, and now that she tried to banish all thoughts of her unpleasant situation and be gay, it was most bewitching. That Toby had an eye for beauty was evident from the frequency that he glanced up at her.

"By golly! she am scrumyshus!" he told himself. "I calk'late she am 'bout de fines' piece ob feemale gender dat dis chile ebber had de bonah ob an interjuce ter. Guess dey ain't no gittin' 'round dat."

Finally they came upon a man who was standing directly in their path, regarding them close-

ly. They both stopped with a cry of surprise and fear.

The man was dressed in the buckskin suit of a scout and guide, and was leaning on a rifle of the latest and most improved pattern.

Hattie recognized him in an instant.

It was Nebraska Nat!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GUIDE SPEAKS OUT.

HATTIE uttered a cry of joy, and ran forward with outstretched hands.

"Oh, Nat!" she almost shrieked.

The guide sprung forward and caught both of her hands in his own, a light of amazement and delight beaming in his eyes.

"Hattie—Miss Holmes! Great heavens! is it possible!" he exclaimed, in a strong, hearty voice that was music to her ears.

Then for several moments they gazed into each other's face as if almost unable to comprehend that they were not dreaming.

Hattie was the first to break the silence.

"I can hardly believe that it is truly you," she declared, almost hysterically.

"And I was trying to convince myself that you were not the vision of a disordered brain, when you looked up and saw me gazing at you," he laughed. "Are you sure yourself that you are really here? I almost fear to release your hands lest you fade into thin air before my very eyes."

"There is not the least danger of such a thing, Nat," she laughed. "I am here in flesh and blood."

"But who is this colored gentleman with you?" asked Nat, bestowing a suspicious glance on Toby, who was slowly advancing, as if still uncertain that Nat was a friend.

"That's—oh, that's Toby. Toby, this is a friend."

"Huah!" grinned the little ducky. "I'se drefful 'lad ob dat! I was skeered dat he was one ob dem ar Hawks w'at we'se heerd ser much erbout. If he was, I'se jest gwan ter lite on 'um an' broke um all up—I jest was!"

Nat could not repress a smile. Toby's assertion did not correspond with his aspect of terror.

"Rather a gallant knight, Miss Holmes. I am pleased to note that we have such a protector."

Hattie fancied that there was an unpleasant ring to Nat's voice, but when she glanced into his face she found it so frank and open that she rebuked herself for the thought. Of course the guide would have a little sport at Toby's expense. In another moment she had forgotten so trivial a thing in her eagerness to learn something of her father.

"Where is papa, Nat? Surely he must be near or you would not be here."

A slight cloud passed over the guide's face.

"Yes, he is near, I trust," he replied, slowly.

She looked up into his face questioningly.

"But did you not just come from him? Of course he is searching for me."

"I can assure you of that, although I must confess that I did not just come from him."

"Why, how can that be?"

"Well, it is not easy to explain," admitted the guide, speaking slowly. "Your father and several friends are among these Hills, searching for you. I was with the party, but a most singular thing separated me from them."

"And you do not know where father is now?"

"No; but if any one can find him, I can."

These words cheered the girl, and she asked him to tell her how he came to be separated from the searchers. Nat led her to a comfortable spot to rest near by, and threw himself down at her feet. Toby sat down close at hand.

"There were seven of us who came into the Hills in search for you," said Nat, with his eyes fastened on the ground. "We believed your kidnappers to have been the Gold Hawks, and when it was found that Parson Perkins was missing, more than one thought him one of the outlaws, and some even hinted that he was their chief."

Hattie was surprised.

"Parson Perkins?" she exclaimed.

"Yes; he was found missing the morning that your disappearance was discovered."

A sudden light seemed to break over the girl's face.

"I believe they were right," she declared.

"Everything that occurred that night seems like a dream, but I think I remember hearing a familiar voice giving orders in a low tone, once or twice. That must have been the Parson. Why, what a treacherous scoundrel that man is!"

"You may well say so. He will receive little softness if he falls into my hands. But to explain:

"When it was found that you were missing the excitement was great at the train. A party of pursuers was immediately organized, and under my lead, took up the trail of the kidnapper, for at first it seemed that one person had done the job. We thought that the false Parson had worked the game all alone, as both he and his horse were missing. But we were soon undeceived, for we came to where the kidnapper

was joined by at least a dozen companions. We pressed straight forward on the trail and it led us a roundabout course on the plain till at night we found ourselves almost back to the starting-point."

Here Nat paused and seemed to be studying the ground in an earnest manner. Hattie followed his gaze but saw nothing to attract his attention. She little knew that he was thinking of the terrible massacre of the train-people and trying to think of a way to avoid telling her without arousing her suspicions.

"Go on, Nat," she urged.

He looked up with a slight start.

"Well—to shorten the story—we decided that your captors had carried you straight into the Hills and that we had been wasting our time in following a decoy trail. Then we resolved to make straight for the Hills with no delay. We did so, and before the moon got down behind the western peaks we lay down to rest in a little valley not far from the open plain. That is, the others lay down to rest and I kept guard."

She looked at him admiringly and murmured:

"The same noble Nat, ready to bear the hardships while others take their repose!"

A bright light shone in his eyes and he turned away his head, at the same time making a deprecatory gesture.

"Don't give me any praise. I believed it my duty, and I always try to do my duty. But, that night I failed!"

"I must have been unusually sleepy, for when I set myself to keep awake a certain length of time, I usually succeed with little trouble in doing so. That night, however, I was fearfully tired, and when I sat down to rest for a minute I little thought that I should fall asleep—but I did. As the saying is: 'The first thing I knew I didn't know anything.'"

"Years ago I was a veritable sleep-walker—a somnambulist. I have fancied for some time that I was forever rid of my old plague and that I never should walk in my sleep again; but I was destined to be undeceived. Although I fell asleep on duty it was not to rest. Once more I walked in my sleep, and when morning dawned I found myself in a strange spot. How I came there I could not imagine for a long time, but as I lay on the ground, racking my brain to think what had happened, everything came back to me. I remembered all that had occurred up to the time when I fell asleep while on duty. What had occurred while I slept I could not remember, but my position solved the problem. I had walked—or rather, ridden—in my sleep, for not far away, I found my horse quietly feeding."

"All this must seem very strange to you, and did I not know that such things actually occurred—that they occurred to me—I could not be led to believe it possible. It seems so unnatural for a sleeping man to saddle his horse and ride away through the night unconsciously that I should blame no one for disbelieving my story. Yet it is true as gospel every word of it."

"Of course I resolved to return to the little valley where I left my sleeping comrades, and return at once. But it was easier to resolve than it was to carry out the resolution, as I soon discovered. As I had traveled to that spot unconsciously, it was not an easy thing to decide whether I had gone north, east or west. I knew I had not traveled south, for that course would have carried me out upon the plains. Well, to cut my story short, I searched for my comrades and did not find them. It was sunset before I found my way back into the little valley where we had stopped the night before, but then I found that the entire party had gone onward without me. I could not follow their trail in the darkness, so I camped there for the night. In the morning I attempted to follow their trail, but it was not long before I discovered that such a thing is next to impossible in these Hills. I lost track of them, but continued the hunt, and—I am here."

Nat stopped abruptly—so abruptly that Hattie was startled.

"Is that all?" she faltered.

"Yes, that is all," he replied.

Toby drew a little further away from the guide. He did not care to be too near a man who cut such queer antics while he slept, for he felt that there was no telling what he would do while awake.

"And you have not seen father since?" asked the girl.

Nebraska Nat shook his head.

"I have not been fortunate enough to find him."

"But you think he is still near—is searching for me?"

"I am positive that he is."

"You will take me to him?"

"Surely; I shall be delighted to be of such service to you."

His eyes spoke more than his lips, and a faint blush suffused Hattie's cheeks as she remembered their last interview. Her eyes fell to the ground but she felt that he was watching her closely.

At that moment Nat heartily wished that the little darky was anywhere but where he was. Whether Toby understood the situation or not cannot be said, but certain it is, he quietly arose

and sauntered away a few steps. So silent were his movements that Hattie was not aware that he had stirred.

Nebraska Nat saw his opportunity and gazing straight into the girl's pretty face, he murmured softly:

"Any service that I can perform for you, Hattie, I shall be delighted to render. You know the secret of my heart—you know how dearly I love you. Ah, no! You do not—cannot know the extent of my love—"

She placed her hand on his arm, pleadingly.

"Nat—please don't!" she implored.

He seemed to struggle with himself for a moment; then he broke forth in a low, passionate tone:

"I cannot keep still! My heart is too full for silence! Oh, Hattie! you do not dream how dearly I love you! I cannot silence my tongue when my heart is crying to you; I must speak out although it may make you hate me forever. My love for you is so deep, so strong that I would willingly go through fire and flood to please you! I would suffer the tortures of the damned to save you a pang! The thought that you have said you can never be mine is maddening me—is torture most terrible! You know not what I have suffered since you were kidnapped by those villainous wretches! Your father himself cannot have suffered as much. And yet, Hattie, you spurn my love! My God! what a miserable wretch I shall be if I do not succeed in winning you for my own!"

She shrunk back as if his burning words had scorched her and put out her hand toward him in a gesture that was terribly expressive. A moment before they had been talking as two friends might have done; now she felt as if a volcano had belched forth fire and smoke and wrapped her in furnace heat and midnight gloom! She was appalled at the passion she had unconsciously awakened in the soul of this handsome man.

"Oh, Heaven protect me!" she gasped.

He heard, and for an instant a terrible look swept over his sun-bronzed face. It was like a thunder-cloud that came and vanished in an instant. A faint smile that was full of regret took the place of the banished cloud, and his voice was full of self-reproach as he said:

"I beg a thousand pardons, Miss Holmes. I see I have made a fool of myself again. You need not shrink from me, for you are perfectly safe in my care. I would not harm you for a world! Although he has hot blood in his veins, Nebraska Nat is a man, and will defend any true woman with his life. It is my hot head that defeats my purpose many times. The words that a thousand other men would repeat with the coolness and precision of a machine, leap from my tongue in a torrent. I have made a vow to win you for my wife, but if I cannot do so in a square, honorable way, then I will drink the dregs from the cup of defeat. You can trust to my honor."

These words relieved her. For a minute she had stood in actual terror of this bright-eyed, wildly-talking man, but now the fear was slowly leaving her. She faintly called to Toby, who heard and at once hastened to her side.

"Nat," she said slowly, "let us try to find my father."

He bowed and arose to his feet. She did not seem to see his outstretched hand, but arose without assistance.

In a moment he saw that, instead of advancing his cause, he had built a barrier between them that threatened to shut off forever the friendly familiarity they had enjoyed, in the past.

"She shall be mine just the same!" he vowed within his heart.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MISFORTUNE FOLLOWS MISFORTUNE.

"WHERE is your horse, Nat?"

Hattie asked the question in a quiet manner that surprised the guide. He had expected that she would speak differently after the look that he had seen in her eyes a few moments before. He drew a breath of relief and answered:

"It is concealed a short distance away. I left it there while I went to the hilltop to survey the surrounding country. While I was up there I caught a glimpse of two figures moving along the valley. I saw that they were a male and female, but I did not dare believe it possible that one was you. Nevertheless, I hastened down here and waited for you to come along. My delight when I found that it really was you was unbounded."

He was watching her closely while he spoke, and was disappointed to note that she did not turn her eyes toward him, but kept them steadily averted.

The barrier still stood between them.

For a moment both were silent, while Toby stood regarding them curiously, as if he could not understand all that was written on their faces.

Nat was the first to speak.

"You had best remain here, Miss Holmes, while Toby and I go for the horse."

A shadow fell on her face.

"And why should Toby go?" she asked. "I do not dare to remain here alone."

"We shall scarcely go beyond your hearing," was the reply. "Wingfoot is close by, and we shall return almost before you know that we have left you. I wish to speak with Toby!"

She did not attempt to utter any further remonstrance, but quietly sat down on the small bowlder. She fancied that she knew why the guide wished to speak with Toby, but all of a sudden she wondered why he had asked her nothing concerning her adventures since she was kidnapped. What she had told him he had not asked to hear. She slowly shook her head, and watched the tall form in buckskin, and its dwarf-like companion, until both had disappeared from view.

"He is a strange man," she said aloud. "He is so tall, handsome, and noble-appearing; yet there is something about him that makes me fear him. He is so fiery and passionate—he talks so strangely, and seems utterly incapable of checking himself when he speaks to me of love. I feel that if it were not for the mad passion which he feels for me, we might be the best of friends."

The sun was sinking behind the distant mountains, and night was not far away. She watched the glory of golden light which bathed the peaks, and stole down toward the valleys till it was lost amid the purple shadows. It was a scene fit for an artist's brush.

"How beautiful the world would be if it was not filled with sorrow, sin, strife and the wicked passions of men!" she murmured.

The ringing report of a rifle came down the valley, and broke her musing.

She leaped to her feet, a look of terror flashing in her eyes.

"What has happened?" she gasped.

Then to her ears came several wild cries, and three or four more shots in swift succession.

"Great heavens!" burst from the lips of the frightened girl. "Nat and Toby are in trouble!"

For a moment she hesitated, on the point of turning to flee away, keeping her eyes fastened on the place where the guide and the little darky had disappeared from view. The sharp clatter of a horse's hoofs came to her ears, and Nebraska Nat swept into view, mounted on his magnificent dark horse, rifle in hand.

Toby was not with him!

The bridle-rein was laying loose upon the horse's neck, apparently that the guide might have both hands free. As he came on he swung his rifle across his back.

Hattie stood trembling and fear-stricken. On came the flying horse, and as it approached she saw a look of desperate determination on the face of its rider.

What was Nebraska Nat about to do?

The question was soon answered.

As he swept up to where the trembling girl stood without seeming to slacken the speed of the horse in the least, he leaned toward her, she felt a sudden shock and then seemed to be rushing through the air with a strong arm clasped about her waist.

The guide had snatched her up while at full speed!

For several moments she lay in his arms with her head on his shoulder, her eyes closed. She did not feel the mad, exultant beat of his heart, and had she done so, would have attributed it to the adventure he had just passed through.

Onward they swept along the valley, the man casting frequent glances over his shoulder.

After a time, Hattie opened her eyes, but she did not speak for a minute at least. Suddenly, she cried faintly:

"Where is Toby?"

Nat hesitated about replying, and she plainly saw that he dreaded to answer.

"Speak!" she gasped; "tell me the worst!"

"Then I fear you will never see Toby again," he uttered, slowly.

"He is dead?"

"I think so. The first shot dropped him and I saw him clasp his hand to his breast. I was on the point of leaping on Wingfoot's back, but I saw a dusky face rise up from behind some rocks where a little puff of smoke was visible, and I paused long enough to drop the red fiend. Toby is avenged."

"Poor—poor Toby!" sobbed the girl, tears starting from her blue eyes.

"Yes, poor fellow!" echoed the guide. "He met a sad end, and I came near sharing his fate. I heard the bullets whistle around my head as I dashed away on Wingfoot's back, but not one touched me!"

"This is a terrible thing!" sobbed Hattie. "I had learned to like Toby so; he was a kind-hearted lad, if his skin was black."

Nat said nothing, but cast another glance over his shoulder.

"Do you think we shall be pursued?" asked the girl.

"I fear pursuit; but if the reds have no horses, we are all right. If they have mounts, they will give Wingfoot a terrible siege. He has a double burden to carry."

But the frequent glances that he cast over his

shoulder failed to show him a sign of pursuers, and finally he drew the horse down to a slower pace.

"It is no use to wind him, if they do not press us," he said.

For an hour the magnificent horse bore the double burden, and still they saw or heard nothing of pursuers.

Finally Nat drew up, and, placing Hattie on the ground, dismounted by her side.

"I am not going to tax Wingfoot with a double burden when there is no need of it," declared the guide. "I can walk, but you shall ride."

When the horse had rested a few moments, Nat assisted Hattie to mount, and once more they went forward.

"Do you think there is any prospect of our finding father to-night?" asked the weary girl, after a long silence.

"Of course there is a chance that we may," he replied; "but I would not pin my faith on such a happy contingency if I were you. It is unpleasant to be disappointed."

His words filled her with despair rather than gave her hope, for she believed that he thought it improbable that they should come across the searching party that night.

Must she spend the night with him in the hills? The thought was not a pleasant one by any means.

It seemed that he read her mind, for he quickly said:

"You need have no fears, for you are perfectly safe with me. I would not harm you for the wealth of Croesus. I love you too truly, dearly!"

She made no reply, for she knew not what to say. Her silence seemed to make him bold rather than check him.

"I have been a little hasty in expressing my regard, but I trust you will forgive me. It was my heart that spoke, not my head. My cooler judgment would have told me better, but I did not listen to reason."

She hastened to check him with a few words, hurriedly spoken. Then, without pausing, she hurried on to tell him of her own adventures since she was kidnapped from the train. He listened quietly, but she fancied that he was not much interested. His strange actions both puzzled and alarmed her.

"I do not understand him," she thought. And she was right; she little understood what was passing within his brain.

When she had finished relating her adventures a little silence fell on them both. Once more her thoughts wandered back to poor Toby and his sad fate; and whatever Nat's thoughts were, his grave, handsome face was unreadable.

The shadows grew deeper in the gulches and ravines and the light faded from the higher peaks. They were traveling along through a dusky gloom, but neither of them seemed to heed their surroundings.

Suddenly the guide's hand rested on his companion's arm.

"Hattie—Miss Holmes," he said, softly.

She shrank from him, for she dreaded what she felt sure was coming. Why would he not cease his love talk when he knew it was so distasteful to her?

"Miss Holmes," he repeated, "whatever may happen, do not forget that I am ready to make any sacrifice for your sake. The time may come when I can show you the depth of my devotion. Perhaps when you learn that my love for you is something more than talk, you may look on me with different eyes."

She was about to reply, when a dozen dark shadows rose up all around them.

"Scoop the girl and look out for the cuss with her!" commanded a hoarse voice.

Nebraska Nat uttered a shout of surprise, and a revolver leaped into his hand.

"Back, you devils!" thundered his ringing voice.

Crack! crack!

Two spouts of flame; two shots which seemed as one echoed along the ravine; two men reeled back with cries of agony and fell to the ground.

Then they closed in upon him and bore him down, struggling like a Samson.

This much the girl saw, and then she was torn from the horse's back and borne away!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PARSON SHOWS UP AGAIN.

WORDS cannot express Dismal Dan's amazement on discovering that the little darky and the girl were not where he left them not far from the tent in the gloomy depths of Wind Canyon. He was both surprised and dismayed.

"Waal, I'll be skinned!" he drawled, as he gazed around in a helpless way.

But the welcome sight of his two proteges did not reward his vision.

"(Gone)" he sighed, drearily. "I might 'a' knowed 'twould bin so. Thar don't never northin' work jest ez I plan it. But whar they gone?"

This was a puzzler; but Dan did not long remain inactive.

"One thing's sartin," he nodded. "They didn't git past me down ther canyon an' so they must 'a' went ther other way. But w'at

started 'em orf? Did they git skeered o' suthin'? Ef so, w'at? I'll never fine out ef I stan' hyer all day."

With an unusual amount of haste, the old Range Tramp started off in the very tracks of the girl and the negro lad. As he hurried along, he kept muttering:

"Sufferin' Sampson! but this do beat ther ragged Dutch, an' no mistook! Ter thunk ther arter I tole 'em ter stay rite thar thay'd skip soon's my back wuz turned. I reckon thar must 'a' bin suthin' ter sear' 'em orf."

Then he stopped short with a startled look on his face.

"Pashent Job!" he finally exclaimed; "it c'u'dn't bin reds!"

After a few moments, he hurried onward again. He was both surprised and startled when he found himself beyond the confines of Wind Canyon to suddenly come face to face with a party of mounted men, led by a lad who was afoot.

In an instant he recognized the latter as Rifle Roy and knew that those with him must be friends.

Roy hailed Dan's appearance with a cry of joy.

In a few moments the old borderman was acquainted with the name of each man in the party, and without delay, Roy told him briefly of his adventures since they parted and explained who Martin Holmes was. He informed Dan that they were searching for the lost girl and desired his aid in finding her.

The Range Tramp listened without a word till the young miner had finished, and then he told his story. In a moment Martin Holmes became greatly excited.

"Oh, heavens!" he cried; "have I lost her again when she was almost in my arms?"

Old Hasty's hand rested lightly on the tortured man's sleeve and the '49er said, encouragingly:

"Keep er stiff upper lip, Holmes. Ther chances are thet yer gal's better orf than she'd be in ther han's o' them pesky Gold Hawks. We'll fine her yit all right, an' don't ye fergit it. Don't lose yer courage."

"But she may fall into the hands of that vile gang before we can find her."

"She may, but we'll keep thinkin' thet thar's better luck waitin' her. She's sunwares 'mong these hyer Hills an' we are jest ez ap' ter fine her ez ther Gold Hawks be—an' er leetle apter."

"Then let us be moving at once; I cannot bear to remain idle while Hattie may be in danger."

"This are a worl' o' sufferin', sin and dissipationments," said Dismal Dan, mournfully. "We'd orter larn ter l'ar our sheer 'thout whinin'. Now, no man ever heard Dan Sadly complainin' 'bout his lot. Ter be shore, ther worl' hes used me uncommonly hard, an' Old Time hes gi'n me er kick uvery blamed chance he got, but then, sez I: 'Dan, ye mus' take ther bitter with ther sweet, an' be ez cheerful ez ye kin.' An' thet's ther way I've allus dun."

'Bijah Bigfist could not repress a broad grin.

"Thet pusson hes ther durndest ijee o' cheerfulness thet I ever heard on," he observed to himself, in a stage whisper.

If old Dan heard the big Californian, he did not betray the fact by word or glance.

"Dan," said Roy, "can't you find the trail of the lost ones and lead us to them?"

The old borderman shook his head.

"It's ez much ez er doubt ef I kin," he replied.

"Ther bottom o' Wind Canyon don't leave much o' er sign, an' ez fer pickin' up ther trail in ther hills, I mought an' then erg'in I moughtn't. We'd be jest ez ap' ter fine ther nigh an' ther gal ez ter fine ther trail."

A look of disappointment settled on the faces of both Martin Holmes and Roy Raymond. They had hoped that the old Hills Tramp would be able to take the trail of the lost ones and lead the little party to them without much delay.

After a time, the solemn man decided to make an attempt to pick up the trail somewhere near the place that the darky and the girl had probably left the canyon. He spent the larger part of an hour at the task and finally succeeded, as he believed, in finding the trail that led away from the canyon.

Then the impatient little party started, following close at the heels of the old ranger, who was afoot, and traveled the most of the time with his eyes fastened on the ground. At times Dan would go forward almost at a run, then again he would barely creep along.

It was not long before Dan came to the place where Hattie had sunk down exhausted. For several moments he examined the ground in silence.

"What do you see?" demanded Holmes, when he could remain silent no longer.

"They treaded hyer ter rest," was the reply. Holmes drew a breath of relief.

"Then they have not yet fallen into trouble?"

"They hadn't then," assured the old borderman.

"Thank Heaven!" breathed the father. "God guard my darling!"

"Amen!" came earnestly from 'Bijah's lips.

They were soon moving onward again, but

Martin Holmes was not destined to see his child that day. After a while Dismal lost the trail. For an hour at least he did his best to pick it up again, but at the end of that time he was obliged to confess himself beaten. Without knowing when they did it, Toby and Hattie had effectually "covered" their tracks.

The anxious father glanced at the sinking sun and uttered a groan.

"What can we do?" he asked, despondently.

"Northin' but hunt," was the unencouraging reply.

Hunt they did, but the dusky shadows of night found the father and daughter as widely separated as they were when the trail was lost.

"My God!" moaned Martin Holmes; "I fear she is lost to me forever! Fate seems working against us!"

And Roy Raymond's heart lay heavily in his breast, for he feared their search would be unsuccessful. The sweet face of the girl whom he had seen but a moment had been painted on his heart in colors which time could not efface.

They were passing through a ravine, when suddenly Holmes uttered a cry and reined up his horse. With his right hand he pointed up toward the upper edge of the bluff on their left. Instinctively every eye followed the course pointed out by the agitated man.

Far above them, outlined against the sky beyond, they saw the dark form of a man who was standing on the very verge of the precipice.

"Weepin' Isreel!" drawled Dismal Dan; "thet's Noel Kenyon, ther double-faced, ur I'm er saint!"

Martin Holmes said nothing after that first cry, but his face looked almost ghastly in the gathering gloom and his entire form trembled.

The man above seemed to have heard that cry, although it is doubtful if he could see the little party in the darkness below. In a moment he started away and, like a thing of evil, vanished in the shadows.

"Go it, you blessed ole fraud!" cried the Range Tramp. "Tain't best I git my jukes on-ter ye!"

Then the party went onward again.

"'Bijah," whispered Old Hasty, leaning toward his pard, "thet was ther very cuss w'at we see'd on ther p'int o' rocks t'other nite when we fust struck ther hills."

'Bijah nodded.

"Jest w'at I was thinkin'," he said.

"You know w'at thet means?"

"You bet; trubble fer Holmes ef thet's ther man he thinks it is."

Thirty minutes later the party halted for the night, although Martin Holmes was anxious to keep moving. Old Hasty and 'Bijah succeeded in convincing him that further search would be useless that night.

A secluded spot had been chosen for the camp, where the danger of a visit from hostiles was very small. Dan felt so safe that he even consented for a small fire to be built.

"Ther smoke won't give us erway like it w'u'd in ther daytime," he said; "an' ther light can't be seen twenty rods erway on either side. Tain't pollerocy ter buil' er fire, but I don't reckon it'll do enny hurt."

The entire party was satisfying the cravings of the "inner man" when out of the darkness stalked a tall form that gave no warning of its approach. Without a word, the new-comer sat down and deliberately helped himself to a piece of deer's meat, unmindful of the fact that he was covered by eight revolvers.

A simultaneous cry of amazement burst from the lips of every man in the party, for they all recognized the new-comer.

It was Parson Phineas Perkins!

"Great flatterin' flapjacks!" gasped Dismal Dan.

"The Parson!" exclaimed the others.

And the person who was the author of so much amazement helped himself to another mouthful of meat before he paused to observe:

"I don't beleeeve you was expectin' me—I really don't."

"I'd as quick thort o' seein' ther devil hisself!" asserted Old Hasty.

"Durn ye! you're dead!" Dismal declared.

"Oh, no, I am not," the Parson retorted; "though it's by the mercy ov God that I live an' hav' my bein'—it reely is."

"But I saw ye plunge inter Satan's Sink," muttered Dan, in a puzzled way. "You must be in league with the Ole Boy bisself ter git out o' thar without bein' cooked inter a stew. I don't jest git it through my noddle."

"Ah!" sighed the Down-Easter, "far from being Satan's servant, I am his untiring foe, seekin' whom I can snatch from his grasp like a brand from the burnin'. I trewly came nigh peerishin' in the depths ov a most horrible place that cannot be far from the fires below, for I could smell sulphur—I reelly could."

Dan nodded slowly.

"I knew I c'u'dn't 'a' b'in mistooked," he said. "I saw ye w'en ye went inter thet heel; but I never 'spected ter see ye erg'in."

"Daw tell!" came from Parson Perkins's lips, as he took another bite. "I knew not that a living soul saw us take that dreadful plunge."

"Yas, I saw ye," repeated Dismal, once more pointing his revolver at the Parson's head. "I

kinder thort that woun' up your worsted an' made an en' o' yer deceit an' double-dealin', but it's plain that I wuz mistooked. An' now we'll proceed ter hawl ye over ther coals er leetle ourselves. You'r our meat, Cap'n Hawk—*sur-render!*"

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE CLUTCH OF A DEADLY FOE.

A LOOK of mild surprise appeared on Parson Perkins's face, and for a moment his jaws ceased their regular motion while he stared wonderingly at the old borderman. Then for the first time he seemed to notice Dan's revolver.

"Look out!" he squawked, with sudden fear. "If that pistil is loaded it may go off! Be keerful, dew!"

This sudden change caused several of the party to smile, but Dismal's face did not relax a particle. Indeed, his usual mournful countenance seemed to assume a sudden sternness.

"Thet thar leetle game's played, my man," he said, impressively. "You can't pull ther wool over ther eyes o' this hyer crowd no longer. We know you an' we've got ye foul."

And all the Parson seemed capable of murmuring was, "Dew tell!"

Old Hasty seemed to suddenly awaken. With a quick stride he reached the Parson's side, and his hand closed like a vise on Perkins's shoulder.

"Yes, we know ye, you dirty, gal-stealin' varmint!" hissed the '49er. "Whar's Hattie Holmes?"

"Yes," echoed Martin Holmes, "where is my child?"

The Parson seemed to turn pale, and it was evident that he was trembling violently.

"Friends—friends," he faltered; "what do you mean? You alarm me—you reely dew!"

This seemed to exasperate Old Hasty.

"Let up on the kinder tork," he snapped, giving the Parson a shake. "It won't wash. We've got ye now an' got ye foul. I axed ye whar Hattie Holmes is."

"I don't know—reely I don't," protested the Parson, appearing thoroughly frightened.

"W'at did you do with her?"

"I don't know; I never done a thing. There is some mistake—there must be!"

"It was er mistake w'en you took her," Hasty asserted, "er blamed bad one fur you. We've all sw'ared ter guv ye w'at ye deserve w'en we got our paws onter ye; an' now we've got 'em thar you've got ter took it."

"Look hyer, pards," put in Biglist, "ef this cuss is Cap'n Hawk, it's only fair ter s'pose thet sum o' his gang are purty nigh. I don't believe thet it w'd be er very bad plan ter kinder rekennoiter ther surroundin's."

"Pasbent Job! ye'r torkin' now," assented Dismal Dan, and he instantly seized his rifle.

"You go thet way; I'll go this. Look right sharp fer ther Parson, Hasty, fer he's ez slippery ez an eel." Then whirling, he vanished into the shadows, while Big 'Bijah disappeared the other way.

When the two men returned to the camp they found that Old Hasty had bound the suspected Parson hand and foot. "Jest ter meck him rest easy," the '49er explained.

"I didn't see er durned thing out this year way," 'Bijah reported.

"Ner did I out t'other," said Dan. "I don't reckon thar's enny o' his pals roun'."

This put the party at their ease again.

"I have been questioning him," Holmes said, "and he tells a very strange story of being knocked senseless and carried away from the train, on the night that Hattie was kidnapped."

"O' course he does," snuffed 'Bijah. "He'd hev sum durned lie reddy."

When Dan and the big Californian had seated themselves, the Parson was asked to repeat his story, which he did, telling substantially the same yarn that he had related the night he appeared in the camp of the boy miners. Dismal watched him closely while he was talking, and tried to discover some contradiction of the former story, but failed.

'Bijah was silent for several moments after the Down-Easter had finished, and knowing his peculiarities, Old Hasty waited in silence for him to speak. Finally the big fellow uttered a snort of incredulity.

"Too durned thin," was his decision, at which the '49er nodded assent.

The Parson looked discouraged.

"Friends," he uttered, slowly, "I hav' told you the trewth. If you do not beleve me, I know of no way to convince you; but I am reddy to give you the word ov a Christian thet I hav' not attempted to deceeve you with a falsehood—I reely am."

"O' course you are," grinned 'Bijah. "I don't blame ye er bit, fer I'd do ther same crooked thing merself ef I was you, an' had got inter such a blessed predicament."

"W'at are we goin' ter do with ther critter?" asked Hasty.

"Hang him ter ther nearest tree," suggested Dismal Dan.

Perkins uttered a cry of fear and entreaty.

"No, no, no!" he begged. "The good Lord protect me!"

"I've allus foun' it er bad plan ter call on strangers fer aid," drawled Big 'Bijah.

The '49er appeared to be thinking deeply. Finally, he remarked:

"I think the best thing we kin do is ter hole ther critter in our han's, fer he may cum handy by an' by, fer ef ther Gold Hawks git their fingers onter ther gal erg'in, p'r'aps we may be able ter exchange pris'ners."

"Good ijee! Ole man, you do know er leetle suthin' ef you do look like er fool. I will guv ye credic fer thet," was 'Bijah's remark.

"'Bijah," said the old '49er, with a show of appreciation, "your good opinion is a great boon, an' I am truly touched. Ther only thing thet hurts my feelin's is thet I kin not return ther complymint. Ther blank look o' yer countenance is er dead give-er-way, ole pard."

The big fellow grinned good-naturedly.

"Thet's all rite, pard," he drawled. "I kin stan' it, an' my turn'll cum next."

"Thar's one thing thet I'd like fer ther Parson ter 'splain," observed Dismal, "an' thet's how he got outer Satan's Sink. I kalkerl'ed thet he wuz er goner w'en I saw him disappear inter thet hole. An' I'd like ter know w'at bekum o' Noel Kenyon. He went in, too."

"That was reely a terrible advencher," the Parson admitted. "You see, that man that you call Kenyon is a sinner of the deepest dye. He is also a deadly foe ov mine. I was surprised when I met him on the brink ov that terrible hole. I would have fled from his presence, but he detained me. He spoke unholy words which wounded my soul, and when I would have prayed for his salvation, he scoffed at me. Then the Lord suffered a righteous anger to fall upon me and I told the confounded double-face liar what I thought ov him. Hang his hide!" exclaimed the Parson, warming up, and seeming to forget himself; "I give him as good as he sent, by gosh! I did! Then we clinched."

"I can hardly deescribe the teerrible struggle that follered. It was awful—it reely was. That man was much the stronger, but the good Lord lent me strength and by gum! I held my own, I did! The fall inter the pit was an accident which neither expected. Suddenly we foun' ourselves goin' down, down!"

"Just when I had begun to think that we had fallen inter the Bottomless Pit, we landed in water. The force ov that concussion nearly knocked the breeth ov life outer me, but the water kind ov brought me round. Then I noticed that it was blood-warm! The place was so dark and gloomy that I could not see fur when I cum to the top, but I heerd a puffin' and splashin' not fur off and saw a dark object moving on the surface of the water. It was the head ov my foe who was swimmin' away. Then I decided to strike out. I did so and swum ashore, for there is a shore to the warm water lake ov that teerible place."

"I surveyed my surroundin's with feelings ov horror, for I seemed to be in a place of teerible gloom. I could not see the openin' ov the hole above, fur a dense mist hung over the bosom ov the strange lake of warm water. The light from above did not penetrate the mist in er veery forcible manner. When I had beheld what there was to behold, I knelt down and thanked the Lord for preservin' my unworthy life thus fur, and told him I hoped he would keep on in the good work by gittin' me out ov that teerible place before I peerished. Then I got up and looked around."

"I am not goin' to tell all I saw in that horrible place, for you would not beleve my story, but I will say that there is a smell ov sulpher down there that is quite suggestive ov the regions below. I finally found a passage just large enough for me to creep through on my han's an' knees, and in this manner I traveled what seemed at least ten miles, but the Lord answered my prayer and brought me out to the world ov light at last, for which kindness on his part I am much obliged—I reely am."

"But w'at bekim o' ther t'other 'un?" asked 'Bijah.

The Parson shook his head.

"I cannot tell, for I did not see him after he disappeared in the gloom, swimmin' away from me. He may be in there now for all I know."

'Bijah and Old Hasty exchanged glances.

"W'at do you think o' his yarn?" asked the big Californian, of his pard a few minutes later, when he found a chance to speak without the Down-Easter hearing what was said.

"Fishy," was the curt reply.

"Jest my 'pinion."

Holmes had not paid much attention to the Parson's story for his thoughts had been on his lost child. He finally found an opportunity to arise and steal away from the party when no one was observing him. He wished to be alone with his thoughts.

Slowly he walked away from the camp, his head bowed on his breast, and took little note of the distance that he traveled. On into the darkness he walked till the gleam of the camp-fire had died out behind him.

Suddenly a dark form sprung upon his back, hurling him to the ground. An iron hand on his throat prevented an outcry. A voice full of deadly passion hissed in his ear:

"I have you foul, Martin Holmes! You are at my mercy!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

BENEATH A BOWIE.

A SHUDDER ran over Martin Holmes's body as he heard that well-known and hated voice. The fiercely hissed words of his implacable foe seemed to sear into his very soul. For a moment all his strength left him, and then, with sudden energy, he attempted to hurl aside the man who had sprung upon him. But the effort was useless; his foe had him in a grasp that could not be broken.

"Be still!" hissed the false friend, of years gone by. "My knife is at your throat and you shall feel it if you are not quiet," and the villain pricked the flesh of Holmes's neck with the point of a bowie. The threatened man closed his eyes and gave himself up for lost.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed that low, taunting voice. "That makes you as quiet as a child; I thought it would. There is nothing quite like the prick of a knife to bring a man to his senses, for the bowie is a mighty persuader."

The helpless man made no reply; he did not even open his eyes.

"What, have you fainted?" that mocking voice went on. "I gave you credit for being more of a man than that, Martin. Martin! That was what I used to call you in the days of long ago. We were great friends then—great friends! You were very affectionate and confiding then, Martin. Ha! ha!"

Again that chilling laugh, low, soft and malignant. Still Holmes did not open his eyes.

"You have become a coward in your advanced years," taunted the man with the knife. "You were not so once. You faced me bravely enough when your blood was hot. You even dared to kick me after you had come upon me unawares and knocked me down—to kick me! Do you think I have forgotten that, Martin? Gods! I did try to forget, but as well might a great river try to turn back on its course. I might have forgotten the blow, but that kick—never! The bruises of your feet I can feel in fancy upon my body to this day. But you have suffered for every bruise I received—ha! ha! you've suffered!"

How the taunting fiend seemed to gloat over his victim! In the gloom the evil man's eyes seemed to glow like two coals; but Martin Holmes did not see the gleaming eyes, for he still declined to look. And still the cold, chilling voice went on:

"But the end is not yet; I have not finished my revenge. You have followed me from place to place in the vain hunt for your lost son, but you have never found him. You would give me no peace, so I started the story of my own death, and for a time I was allowed to rest. But now I am ready to go on with the work of vengeance, and I am willing that you should know that Argus Damon lives. That must be comfort, indeed!"

"Can you feel my knife, Martin? The point pierces the skin of your throat, and one quick thrust would end your life in a few seconds. But, I am not ready for you to die, Martin! Ha, ha! I am not ready for you to die. I want you to live and suffer; I want you to see the extent of my revenge. It will make you writhe in anguish of soul!"

"Ha! I feel you shudder. You begin to realize the extent of my hatred; you begin to understand what a demon you aroused with your blows and kicks. You won the only woman that I ever loved. Had I seen her first, the result might have been different. Zora—"

"Stop!" burst from Martin Holmes's lips; "do not degrade her sweet name by letting it pass over your foul lips."

Again that soft, evil laugh. "So, that startles you, does it? I had really begun to fear that you had indeed fainted. I am pleased to know that you have more nerve. You will need all the nerve you can command before you have done with me. As I was saying, Zora was—"

"An angel!" declared the man beneath the knife. "And you murdered her, you fiend!"

"That is a serious accusation, Martin. I had nothing at all to do with her death, and you know it."

"I say you did, for you stole her child from her very arms as it were, and that caused her death. You are as much her murderer in the sight of Heaven as if you had plunged a knife into her heart!"

"Bah! you are getting simple-minded, Martin. But I will not argue with you on that point. If you think I caused her death, it will only serve to convince you that my revenge is all the more satisfactory to a man who hates as I do."

"Can you think that you killed the woman who was so kind to you—can you think of it without a feeling of horror?"

For a moment Argus Damon was silent; then he said, in a harsh, unnatural tone which showed that he was moved in spite of himself:

"I don't think anything about it; you are the one to think; I want you to think, for then you will feel the extent of my vengeance. Think, think, think!"

Holmes saw those glowing eyes now, and they

seemed to burn into his very soul. A sudden belief assailed him. Was the man with the knife insane? Possibly Damon had brooded on the subject of revenge so long that he had become insane, at least on that one point. The thought caused Martin to shudder.

"You have have had vengeance enough to satisfy any man," he said, faintly.

"Oh, no, I have not!" laughed the other. "You have not felt the limit of my anger. There is more to follow. Do you want me to tell you what I propose to do?"

"I care nothing about your evil purposes."

"You shall hear them just the same. You have not forgotten how the work began?"

"No! no!" groaned the tortured man; "I shall never forget! Wretch! where is my child my boy, Rolf?"

"What if he is dead?"

"Then I shall thank God, for he will be beyond your blasting influence."

Again that evil laugh.

"But, he is not dead! He lives, almost a man now, but I do not think you would be proud of him should you see him. Indeed, I am sure you would not."

"What do you mean?"

How those glowing eyes seemed to twinkle in the darkness! Martin Holmes fancied that he could discern a fiendish smile of joy on the face which crept a little nearer his.

"Would you be proud of a deformed lad—a boy who was destined to always hobble through life with a cane? Would you be proud of a son whose face was marked with terrible scars so that all who see him shudder? Would you be proud of a son whose back was crooked and whose hands are twisted out of shape?"

Holmes's answer was a groan.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the mocking villain. "You are not pleased with the picture. Well, I did not expect you would be. Yet your son is all that I have described. I have taken good care that you should not be proud of him, and this is a part of my revenge."

"You monster!" gasped Martin, as once more he attempted to struggle from that iron grasp.

"Be still!" commanded Damon, once more pricking Holmes's neck with the knife. "If I see you are breaking away, I shall give you the bowie! Have a little judgment, Martin."

With a faint cry, the helpless man sunk back.

"There, steady, so! Don't be in a hurry, Martin. I am not through talking with you, for I have more to tell you concerning your son. The old woman who maimed him when he was a mere baby did more than distort the body, she ruined his mind. That woman made him a thief and a teller of lies; she taught him to swear and drink liquor. To-day your boy is a living deformity in both soul and body. This is a part of my revenge, Martin Holmes."

"God will punish you, you inhuman scoundrel!" shuddered the suffering parent.

Once more Damon laughed. "Do you think so, Martin? Well, I am willing to take my chances as to that. I have heard a great deal about the judgment of God, but it seems to me that He has about all the business he can attend to without bothering His head to punish human beings for anything that they may do."

"He is apt to smite you in an hour when you are not thinking of such a thing. The day of judgment is not far away, for I can feel that your career is near a close."

"Bah! Don't attempt to frighten me! I am not a child. I shall live to see you in the grave."

"Listen, Martin Holmes: Years ago you won the woman who should have been my wife had I seen her in time. I loved her the moment my eyes rested on her peerless face, and had not the wedding been at hand, I should have sought to snatch her from your grasp. But, it was too late, and I was forced to see her become your wife. How my soul rebelled against such a thing you cannot know, but although my face wore a smile, my heart was full of bitterness. I hated you, for it seemed that you had robbed me. But, I resolved to wait my time. You never knew how I won her love from you; she never let you dream of such a thing. I am satisfied that she hated herself for loving me, yet she did so and could not help it."

"A black lie!" leaped from Holmes's lips. "Zora was as true as the stars!"

"I confess that as far as acts went she was true to you," said Damon; "but, in her heart she loved me. I surprised the secret from her lips one day; but she was so true a woman that she would not be false to you in act, if she was in thought. No inducements that I could offer would have any effect in enticing her to flee with me, although she confessed that she loved me. She was bound to you, and she would remain by your side. When I found that she would not yield to my allurements, I tried the power of might. You came and caught me. The rest you know."

Holmes trembled from head to foot with uncontrollable fury.

"Do you think you can make me believe such a horrible lie?" he demanded. "Zora was an angel, and never in thought or deed was she untrue. Wretch! let the dead rest in peace!"

"Believe or not, as you please; I have given you something to think of. But I have some-

thing more to tell you. The best part of my revenge is yet to come. Hark!"

For a moment both men were silent; then Argus Damon sibilated:

"Some one is coming and I must be away. Let me whisper in your ear what my revenge is to be. Your daughter is in my power, and as I lost her precious mother, I am going to marry the daughter, who is almost as beautiful as the mother was. Think of that! Ha! ha! ha!"

Then Damon's right hand rose and fell; a heavy instrument struck Martin Holmes's head near the temple; a bright light seemed to flash before his eyes, and—he knew no more, for a time.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE HERMIT'S DUNGEON.

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH!

For a moment the gleaming knife in the hand of the Hermit of Wind Canyon seemed ready to do its deadly mission, but, ere the infuriated man could make the fatal stroke, the girl uttered a cry and ran swiftly forward.

"Stop, father, stop!" she cried, in an agony of terror. "What would you do?"

She seized his arm and held fast, as if her puny strength could prevent the blow.

"He is a spy—an enemy! He has come to rob me of you, my treasure!" hoarsely breathed the old man.

"No, no! you are wrong!" she exclaimed. "He is one of the young men who are mining in the canyon, and he found this place by accident."

The man seemed to hesitate.

"He has been filling your ears with lies, child!" he declared.

"No, he has not," she asserted. "I have seen him in the canyon; you have seen him, father. Look at him; you will see that I am right."

The hermit gazed into Jack's face in silence, for several moments, as if studying the countenance revealed to his view. The young miner remained perfectly quiet, for he thought that should he struggle or attempt to get away, the wild man would use that terrible knife. The girl also remained quiet, seeming in suspense as she waited for him to speak.

Finally the hermit shook his head slowly.

"I have seen him," he admitted. "His face is open and frank, but he has discovered our secret home. That seals his doom. He must die!"

But the girl was not ready to see the young miner slaughtered before her eyes. She still clung desperately to the hermit's arm, her face turned appealingly toward the stern countenance of the man whom she called father. Jolly Jack almost forgot his peril while contemplating the strikingly beautiful picture that she made as she stood thus interceding for his life. The stern old man seemed moved, for he turned his face away.

Suddenly a wild chorus of whoops and yells came up from the depths of the canyon.

The three persons in the hidden cabin started and uttered simultaneous exclamations, for they all knew that the cries had come from a party of Indians.

"Toby—Indians!" burst from Jack's lips, while the knife which had threatened the young man's life fell to the hermit's side, and an unreadable look flashed into the strange man's eyes.

The moment Jack saw the knife no longer above him, he attempted to spring away, and for an instant came near succeeding.

"No, no!" cried the mysterious man of Wind Canyon. "Not so fast! I am not ready to let you go now."

Then Jack was lifted from the floor with an ease that was simply amazing. The youth struggled with desperation, but the hermit bore him along until the back of the cabin was reached; then, once more the beautiful girl sprang forward and grasped her strange companion's arm.

"Father!" she cried, "what would you do?"

"Take him to the dungeon which I have prepared for Ruel Darrow," was the reply.

She released his arm and fell back a step, saying:

"You will not harm him now?"

The white beard shook his head.

"Not now, Alsie," he answered. "I will take time to consider what shall be done with him."

She made no further remonstrance; indeed, she stooped and opened a trap-door in the floor, revealing a flight of rude steps which led downward into the darkness.

Jolly Jack shuddered as he gazed down into the gloomy place.

"What right have you to take me there?" he demanded.

"The right of might," was the stern reply. "You have invaded the privacy of my hidden home and you must take the consequences."

A look of encouragement shot from the fair girl's eyes gave Jack hope that his case might not be so bad as it appeared. He saw an almost imperceptible motion of her small left hand and her red lips which seemed a sort of pledge that he should not be harmed.

With a steady, unflinching step the strange

man carried Jack down the rude steps, never hesitating to feel his way along. He was so familiar with the place that he did not seem to need a light. A few steps beyond the foot of the stairs he halted in the dense gloom. Then there was a grating sound as of a heavy door swinging on rusty hinges.

"This is Mose Mason's dungeon," the hermit asserted. "I made it for one man who will one day occupy it, if he ever pursues me here. It is not a pleasant place, young man—far from it."

"You are not going to thrust me into the darkness here and not give me a light, are you?" asked Jack.

His captor laughed—a strange, hollow laugh.

"And why not?" he demanded.

"Because I am not your enemy. There is no reason why you should not treat me with common decency."

"You are not my enemy, you say! That may be true, but you may be his spy."

"But I will give you my word that I am not."

"Your word is of no value under the circumstances. Any man would lie in a similar position."

The young miner saw that it was useless to plead with the stern old man, and once more seized by a spirit of desperation, he felt for his weapons.

They were gone!

The hermit had quietly relieved him of them when he was unaware of it. This discovery almost stunned him for an instant, and before he could recover, his captor thrust him forward into the darkness.

A creaking sound and a dull thud followed, and he knew that the heavy door had closed behind him!

Alone in a dark, dungeon-like cell cut from the solid rock! The young miner's position was far from an enviable one.

But it was not Jolly Jack's nature to despair, and it was not long before a gleam of light shone into the cell through a small square opening in the upper part of the door, and a moment later the prisoner heard a light step on the stone floor without.

"She comes!" he breathed, exultantly. "She would not leave me long in this dismal darkness, thank Heaven!"

The light approached the door and the face of the girl appeared.

"I have brought you a light," she cried. "I am very sorry that father found it necessary to confine you here."

"You cannot feel any worse about it than I do," smiled the young miner. "In fact, I do not believe that you feel quite as badly. But how long am I to be held a prisoner?"

"That I cannot tell. Father takes strange freaks sometimes. He is a strange man."

The girl thrust the light through the opening. "Here, you may take the light in there," she said. "You will find a rocky shelf upon which to set it."

The prisoner took the lamp from her hand, and for a moment their fingers touched. A thrill ran over the youth, and the girl quickly withdrew her hand. Jack found the shelf close at hand and placed the lamp upon it.

"This place does not seem to be oversupplied with furniture," he observed. "If a fellow wishes to lay down, it seems that he will have to take the floor."

For a moment the girl did not speak, then she said:

"I will bring you a bear's hide to spread on the floor. That will be much more comfortable than the hard stones."

Her face disappeared and Jack heard the sound of light footsteps which grew fainter and fainter till they could no longer be heard.

"Heaven bless her! she's a beauty!" came from the young man's lips.

It was not long before she returned.

"Here's your couch," she cried, thrusting one corner of the bear's skin through the opening.

Jolly Jack quickly drew it into the cell.

"A thousand thanks, fair one!" he exclaimed. "When I forget your thoughtfulness I shall have lost my memory entirely. The unpleasantness of my position is forgotten when I look upon your fair face and receive favors from your delicate hands."

"There, there!" laughed the girl. "If you talk that way I shall regret that I brought you these things. Take back your words, sir!"

"Not a word," firmly said the prisoner. "If you regret having brought me the light and hide, you may have them both, but I will not unsay anything which I have uttered."

"I did hope that you were something more than a common flatterer," she murmured, reproachfully.

"And I hope so myself," Jack declared.

For a moment she turned her face away, and when she again looked into the cell the young man saw that the last remnant of her blushes had not faded from her fair cheeks.

"I must go away now," she said. "I hope you will not be very lonely till father returns."

"Where has he gone?"

"In pursuit of the Indians who captured the negro lad in the canyon. He promised me to rescue the poor boy."

"Then Toby was captured by the reds?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hope your father will be successful."

"Oh, he surely will, he never fails," and she disappeared. Jack listened to her retreating footfalls till they died out in the distance and he heard the closing of the trap-door which opened into the cabin on the cliff.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HERMIT'S STORY.

THE young miner was much cheered by the visit from the beautiful girl, although he still felt that his position was far from being pleasant. When she had departed, he threw himself down upon the bear's skin and relapsed into meditation. Of course his fanciful mind was filled with thoughts of the fair face that he had seen at the square aperture in the door a short time before.

"Something tells me that she is as good as she is beautiful," he murmured. "This adventure has a pleasant side anyway, and I am not more than half sorry that I got into the scrape. If the old man whom she calls father was not plainly crazy, I should not consider my position so very bad. But, there is not a doubt that he is decidedly out of plumb, and there is therefore no telling what kind of a freak he may take into his head. I am in his power and if the girl does not intercede in my behalf he may come back determined to put me out of the way."

"Still, even the old hermit is not so very bad, for he has promised to rescue poor Toby from the reds. If he does that, he will not be apt to bring the lad to this hidden cabin."

"I wonder where that old borderman, Dismal Dan, and Pard Roy can be? If they have not already returned to the camp, it must be that they have struck the Parson's trail. There is little doubt that the pretended minister of the Gospel is a fraud of the worst kind. His sneaking actions last night and his sudden disappearance condemn him."

The prisoner was aroused from his cogitations by hearing the dungeon door creak on its hinges, and was startled to see a man enter the cell;—it was the hermit.

Closing the heavy door behind him, the old man turned to face the prisoner. With some surprise, Jack noted that his entire aspect had undergone a change. The wild, insane glare had died out of his eyes and he now appeared as harmless as a child.

For a moment he stood regarding the young miner steadily. Finally he spoke:

"I have news for you."

There was not a trace of excitement or anger in his voice.

"Good or bad?" Jack asked almost involuntarily.

"Good," was the prompt reply.

"What is it?"

"The negro lad has been rescued."

"Then you saved him from the reds?"

The hermit shook his head.

"Not I. I followed the fiends, determined to save him, but another did the work. I discovered a tall, solemn-looking old man trailing the Indians, and I followed the white. He kept close at their heels until they halted, then he effected the rescue of the imperiled darky by slaying the reds, one by one."

"That was Old Dismal Dan!"

"When I saw that he had succeeded," continued the hermit, "I turned back and came directly here."

"And now he may take a notion to settle my hash," thought the young miner, for the strange man stood with folded arms regarding Jolly Jack with an intentness that made the youth uneasy.

"What is he staring at me in that way for?" was Jack's inward question. To decide the matter he demanded, somewhat brusquely:

"Well?"

The man started as if aroused from a deep reverie.

"Pardon me," he said, as he put his hand to his head. "I was thinking. Does it ever hurt you to think? It does me at times. Can you tell me my name?"

The prisoner caught his breath.

"I knew he was crazy," he said mentally.

"He has even forgotten his own name." As Jack did not immediately reply, the lone denizen of Wind Canyon repeated the question.

"I am sorry, but I cannot," was the reply.

Again the hermit carried his hand to his head.

"I feared that you could not," he said slowly.

"No one seems to know my name. My identity is lost forever—lost, lost!"

The young prisoner recoiled a step. There was something so pitiful—so despairing—in his voice and manner that Jack was startled for a moment. The hermit took no note of the youth's alarm, but continued slowly:

"Yes, my identity is forever lost. I am a man without a name. For years I was known as Moses Mason, but, that is not my true name. Back of the time that I found myself lying in the depths of one of the wildest gulches in California I can remember but little. I know that I left the East to seek my fortune in South America; I know that I left relatives behind. I think I had a brother, and that we quarreled,

after which I ran away, swearing to never return until I was a rich man. These things have come to me little by little. I did not find the fortune I sought in South America, but I do not think I ever wrote home. In time I drifted to California, hoping to discover wealth amid the mines."

Here the hermit paused and stared steadily at the floor. Jack waited with some impatience for him to proceed, for the young miner had become intensely interested in the story.

"I did make a fortunate discovery," pursued the hermit, after a short silence. "I had a partner whose name was Ruel Darrow. Is it not strange that I can remember his name and yet cannot recall my own?"

He paused as if for an answer, and Jack replied:

"It is truly strange."

"Yet it is true that I can remember his name but cannot recall my own," declared the hermit in his vague, uncertain way. "I can also remember that I made a fortunate strike. Then the treachery of my partner came to the surface. I know that he hurled me into the gulch, where I found myself when I recovered consciousness. At that time I could not remember what had happened. I had forgotten that such a person as Ruel Darrow ever existed. My left arm was broken and my head was injured. Probably my treacherous partner thought I was dead, and probably he enjoyed the wealth which I had discovered. I know not how I left that gulch; I know little that occurred until I found myself in a public mad-house and was told that my name was Moses Mason. As I could not remember my true name, I was forced to accept a new one."

"I cannot tell how I managed to escape from that dreadful place, but I did so and hastened to put hundreds of miles between myself and the detested spot. I was perfectly sane—as sane as I am now—but I could not remember my own name. I thought that, possibly, Mason was my true name, but I doubted it. It did not seem right. But I retained the name and went East, hoping to find my lost relatives. The attempt was a failure. If I had any living when I went to South America, I was unable to find them when I returned as Moses Mason. This served to convince me that Mason was not my right name. But my true name was lost, and I retained the false one."

"When at last I was forced to give up the fruitless hunt, I once more turned my face westward. Although I was still a young man, my hair and beard had grown white, and people called me old. In Iowa I found a home and married a woman whom I now believe was much older than I. For all of the fact that I was quite sane, people soon got to calling me Crazy Mose. They could not understand my moody ways."

"One day a stranger came to my house, bearing a little child in his arms. He said she was his daughter, and I looked in his dark eyes and saw that he lied. In an instant I believed that, instead of being her father he was her enemy. He said that he was going to California, and he wished me to take care of the little girl until he returned, promising me good pay for doing so. I took the child and he went his way. He has never seen her since."

"It was not long after little Alsie was left in my care that my wife died and I moved away from Iowa. I took the child with me and she has grown to be the beautiful girl whom you have seen. She knows that I am not her own father, yet she loves me as such. I have always treated her kindly and she seems quite like my own child. But, I was not allowed to possess her in peace. The man who left her in my care got on track of me and has pursued me from place to place. Thus far I have avoided him, but he seems determined to recover the girl."

"But he is not my only foe. Ruel Darrow learned in some way that I did not perish in that wild California gorge, and he determined to finish his work. Between my two enemies, I have had a hard time of it. Finally I came here and built the cabin which you found on the cliff. I also made this dungeon, registering an oath that if Ruel Darrow followed me here I would capture him and let him spend the remainder of his life in this place. It would be a fit punishment for his treachery. Thus far he has not found my hidden retreat. You are the second human being who has discovered the hidden cabin. The first was a red-skin and his life paid for his knowledge."

"When you and your friends began working the placer in Wind Canyon I devised a scheme to frighten you away. Besides the regular way of entering the cabin through an underground passage, I have constructed a windlass arrangement so that a person can lower another from a hidden opening on the under side of the cliff to the depths of the canyon, the one making the descent standing in a small wire basket. By means of this arrangement I lowered Alsie to the bottom and she enacted the role of a spirit. But, instead of frightening you away, it excited your curiosity and you made investigations. I am sorry that you found this place."

The lone man stopped speaking, and continued to stare straight at the young miner. The

silence became oppressive, when Jack again uttered his peremptory—

"Well?"

"You now know things of Crazy Mose that are known to no other living man. There is something about your face that wins me. I like you. But I am at a loss to decide what shall be done with you now that you are here."

"I will keep your secret," said Jack simply.

"Your face is a truthful one," acknowledged the old man. "But, dare I trust you?"

Once again he was silent. Suddenly he turned away, saying: "I will return soon."

Then he left the dungeon and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FOR LIFE AND LIBERTY.

AGAIN had Hattie Holmes fallen into the hands of the Gold Hawks. Away through the dusky shadows of the approaching night she was borne in the strong arms of a powerful man. She heard the sounds of the terrible battle between her late companion, Nebraska Nat, and his assailants grow fainter and fainter until they ceased entirely.

"Oh, heavens! they have killed him!" she gasped.

The man who was carrying her heard and understood her words, for he said:

"Not unless they had to, miss. I heard the cap'n say that he was to be taken prisoner. There is an old score between Nebraska Nat and the boss that I reckon the latter means to wipe out himself. Cap'n Hawk is a bad man to butt against and his foes usually find it out sooner or later."

In a few moments they came to where a man was keeping guard over a number of horses. Three minutes later Hattie and her guard were galloping away through the gloom, mounted on two of the best horses of the pack. The girl was bound into the saddle in a manner that made it impossible for her to release herself and spring from the animal's back without attracting the man's attention.

But Hattie resigned herself to fate, and made no attempt to escape. It seemed that fortune was against her, for no sooner was she out of one predicament than misfortune again assailed her. How would it all end?

The dusky gloom deepened till the darkness of night wrapped the earth like a pall. She could not see where they were going, and, in fact, she did not try.

It might have been one hour or two after she was captured—she could not tell—that a hoarse challenge brought them to a halt. Her guard uttered a word which she could not understand, and then a black form appeared before them.

It was the sentinel stationed at the mouth of the Hawks' Den.

The two men exchanged a few words, and then the man and girl went forward once more. Soon the darkness of the outer world gave place to a dead blackness which told her that they had entered a cavern underground.

Then a light flashed before her eyes, and she was lifted from the horse. A short time later she found herself within the very chamber that she had occupied during her previous captivity. Once more she threw herself down on the couch of furs, but not to weep as she had previously done.

"I am past that," she told herself. "What I have passed through has hardened me and blunted my nerves till I have no desire to weep."

As she lay there she thought over her recent adventures from the time that Nebraska Nat had told her of his love to the present time. She could scarcely believe that she had passed through so much, and was still alive and in her right mind.

"Poor Toby," she murmured. "He met death at the hands of the red fiends who haunt these Hills. He was kind-hearted, if his skin was black."

And then, as her thoughts turned to the handsome guide:

"Oh, Nat! Nat! What will be your fate? I fear I have thought too harshly of you, although your nature is fiery and passionate. Your heart is true. And now that you have fallen into the hands of these lawless creatures who are known as the Gold Hawks, you are in a desperate situation indeed. And that man said that Captain Hawk is Nat's deadly foe. Ah! can I do nothing to save the noble fellow? Must I remain idle while they murder him?"

She sprang from the couch and excitedly paced the rocky floor of the "guests' chamber," her whole form quivering with emotion.

"I must do something!" she cried. "But what can I do?"

She paused in the center of the chamber and buried her face in her hands. For several moments she stood there, presenting a picture of despair that would have made the fame and fortune of an artist lucky enough to reproduce the attitude on canvas.

Finally she flung out both her hands in a gesture of utter hopelessness.

"I can do nothing!" she wailed. "I fear that he is doomed—doomed! But his fate may be more merciful than mine. It seems as if God

had forsaken the helpless and was favoring the wicked."

An instant later she turned and crept across the floor to where the curtains hid the mouth of the passage. She walked with the stealth of a panther, although she knew not that she did so. Noiselessly she swept aside the curtains and peered out into the darkness. For several moments she stood there, and then a softly-spoken word of satisfaction passed her lips.

She could discern no guard in the passage.

During a part of her former captivity she had been given liberty to go where she pleased in the cave. Could it be that the outlaws intended to give her the same privilege now? If so she might be able to reach the side of the imperiled guide and render him some assistance. If nothing more, she might free him of his bonds and thus give him a chance to fight for his life.

Trembling with excitement as these thoughts flashed through her brain, she dropped the curtain and turned back into the chamber.

"I must have a little time to quiet my nerves and collect my strength," she breathed. "I will lie down."

Once more she reclined upon the couch, but this time there were no signs of excitement about her. Whatever emotion she felt she carefully repressed.

For at least two hours she lay there. Finally she arose, saying softly to herself:

"Now to make the attempt. By this time it is probable that the robbers are nearly all asleep. This will make my chance of success all the better. God help me!"

With this prayer on her lips, she once more advanced and lifted the curtains. With the cautious tread of a creeping cat, she stole out into the dark passage, the curtains having shut off the light from the chamber as soon as she dropped them.

"I know the way," she thought. "I can find my way along this passage without a light."

She was right. With little difficulty she made her way along, keeping her right hand against the wall to guide her. The passage seemed twice its actual length, but at last she discerned a faint light far ahead. She halted in alarm.

"They have posted a guard at the mouth of this passage," flashed through her mind. "How am I to pass him?"

That question was not easily answered.

Once more she went slowly and cautiously forward. As she came nearer to the light her hopes deserted her, for she felt sure that there was some one near.

Obtaining a position where she could survey the surroundings revealed by the light, a cry of surprise came near breaking from her lips, for she recognized one of the two men revealed to her gaze by the light.

Nebraska Nat!

Bound hand and foot, the guide was lying on the rocky floor near where the passage debouched into another that ran at right angles with it. And, close by, with his back against the wall, a rifle lying across his knees, was a man who was evidently acting as guard over both the helpless guide and the unfortunate girl. By keeping his prisoner at the mouth of the "guests' chamber" the guard was enabled to perform this double duty as easily as he could have guarded one of the prisoners.

"What is to be done?" breathed the hidden girl. "I cannot overpower the guard and release Nat as I would were I a man. What can I do?"

The question was soon answered, for she discovered that the guard was fast asleep to all outward appearance. But Nat was wide awake.

"Perhaps I can steal forward and release him," thought the brave girl. "I will try," and she stole forward at once. With her finger on her lips she entered the circle of light. Nat saw her and started, with evident surprise, but did not make a sound to awaken the sleeping guard.

In a moment with feverish haste Hattie began working at the knots in the cords that held him fast.

"It will take too long that way, little one," softly whispered Nat, his eyes shining with a light of admiration. "There is a knife in my pocket."

An instant later she had the knife, and then the guide was quickly set at liberty. He moved his cramped limbs with difficulty at first, but soon seemed in good trim.

"God bless you, Hattie!" he breathed. "You have set me free, and now I will get you out of this place or die trying! It will not do to leave this fellow here, for he is liable to awake at any moment, and, finding us gone, give the alarm. Then we might be pursued and recaptured. I think I will bind and gag him."

With noiseless tread Nat approached the sleeping sentinel. Stooping, he seized the fellow by the throat with a firm grip and then threw himself upon him.

"Not a whimper!" hissed Nat, as he held the man down upon his back. "If you cry out, I will kill you in an instant."

The suddenly-awakened man was both bewildered and frightened, for he made no attempt to reply or resist.

"Throw me those cords, please," said Nat to the girl. "I will tie the fellow up."

Hattie quickly placed in Nat's hands the very cords which had held him fast, and the guide proceeded to swiftly bind the unlucky guard.

"Now we'll have a gag," said Nat, surveying his work with some satisfaction.

A knotted handkerchief answered very well for a gag, and in a short time the sentinel was fixed so that, to all appearances, he could not raise an outcry if he wanted to.

"Now to get out of here," said Nat.

Clasping Hattie's wrist, he conducted her along the passage until they reached the mouth of the cave. With some dismay Hattie saw that the moon was up.

"We shall now be discovered," she whispered, in dismay.

For a moment Nebraska Nat was silent, as if thinking deeply. Then he said:

"You remain here while I creep forward and attempt to take care of this outer guard. If I succeed I will return for you; if I do not—good-by!"

A moment he held her hand—stooped and kissed it—then was away, skulking along in the shadows of the rocks. Praying that he might be successful, she awaited his return.

Five—ten minutes. Every minute seemed an hour.

Suddenly a dark form came out of the shadows and confronted her. Involuntarily she uttered a low cry.

"Sh!" sibilated Nat. "The road to life and liberty is open. Come!"

CHAPTER XXX.

REUNITED.

WHEN Martin Holmes recovered consciousness he found himself lying beside the camp-fire with Old Hasty bending over him. He glanced around and saw that Dismal Dan, Rifle Roy and the entire party of survivors from the wagon-train were gathered near. Big 'Bijah uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as the unfortunate man opened his eyes.

"Thar he is, all O. K.!" observed the California Goliath. "I knowed he'd cum roun' putty soon."

"Where am I? What is the matter? My head feels strange," muttered Holmes, faintly.

"Tell us 'wat knocked ye out an' we'll tell ye 'wat's ther matter," said the little '49er. "I foun' ye out thar—stumbled over ye—an' you didn't know northin'. I reckoned you'd run plum ergin' er life-sized cyclone or suthin' o' thet sort."

"Yes, yes, I remember! He sprung upon me—my deadly foe!"

"Who—not that thar Argent Damum?"

"Yes, Argus Damon. He held a knife at my throat. I thought my last hour had come."

As soon as he was able to do so, Holmes related to the interested listeners how he met Argus Damon and told of the conversation that was held while the point of a knife touched his throat.

"Weepin' Israel!" grunted the old Range Tramp.

The others uttered exclamations of amazement and sympathy. Old Hasty fairly frothed with rage.

"Satan burn his hide!" he snarled. "I'd like ter git holt o' ther pesky cur!"

At Dismal's request, Martin described Damon.

"I'll be skinned ef I don't believe thet pesky varmint wuz thet double dyed fraud, Noel Kenyon!" was the old borderman's assertion. "Ef ther Parson c'd git out o' Satan's Sink, w'y in course Kenyon c'd. Thet wuz ther man!"

"Verily, I believe you speak the trewth," sighed the Down-Easter. "I did trewly have a miraculous escape from death in that awful hole; perhaps mine enemy escaped as well."

"Oh, dry up, ye prowlin' coyote!" snarled Hasty.

"I believe that Damon is in some way connected with the Gold Hawks," declared Holmes.

"What meeks you think so?" asked 'Bijah.

"He said that my daughter as well as my son was in his power. I fear that Hattie has again fallen into the hands of the villains who kidnapped her from the train. If so, Damon's words are easily understood. He is one of the band, and may be in power among them."

"By Moses! I believe you are right!" cried Old Hasty.

"He may be ther chief, Cap'n Hawk hisself!" ventured Big 'Bijah.

The entire party looked startled.

"Great flutterin' flapjacks!" drawled Old Dismal. "Ef thet is true, we've made er big mistook erbout ther Parson hyer."

"But I do not believe we have made a mistake," asserted another of the party.

"Friends," put in the Parson, solemnly, "the Lord will protect His own—He reely will. I hav' no fear but my innercense will be fully established in His own good time. The Lord is good!"

"I guess we've got ther right pig by ther ear," grunted Old Hasty. "Anyhow 'tain't best ter let go our grip till we are sure thet we've made er mistook."

For a long time the little party continued to talk over the recent exciting events, and not till

a late hour did any of them prepare to sleep. From sheer exhaustion Holmes finally lay down and fell asleep. The others were not long in following his example, with the exception of Old Hasty, who was chosen to act as guard the first part of the night.

Near midnight Bigist took the '49er's place, and allowed Hasty to get some rest. Dismal Dan had volunteered to serve during the latter part of the night.

But 'Bijah did not have to arouse the old ranger.

Near two o'clock in the morning something happened that aroused the entire party.

Nebraska Nat and Hattie walked out of the shadows into the small circle of light made by the camp-fire.

'Bijah had sat down to smoke, and fallen into a drowse. He heard no sound till he opened his eyes, and saw Nat and Hattie standing before them. He stared at them in blank amazement, feeling certain that his eyes were deceiving him.

"You're a poor sentinel, old man," laughed the guide. "A party of red-skins could creep in here and scalp the whole party, and you would know nothing about it till they began operations on your topknot."

"Great Jinks!" gasped the big Californian. And then he uttered a yell that awoke every sleeper.

"Turn out hyer!" roared 'Bijah. "Thar are viseters in camp. Roll out!"

What a scene of excitement followed!

Holmes was nearly wild with joy when he folded his daughter in his arms, and tears of happiness ran down his cheeks. The little party who witnessed the affecting reunion was also moved. Every man shared Martin Holmes's uncontrollable delight, and tears appeared in many an eye.

One by one the happy girl greeted the entire party, taking the hand of each and telling him how glad she was to see him. Roy Raymond came last. Hattie uttered a little cry of delight as she saw the brave youth who had rescued her from the Hawks' Den the first time.

"Is it really you?" she exclaimed, hysterically, as she seized his hand. "Why, I thought you surely must be dead!"

"But I am not, by any means," he replied, coloring warmly as she held fast to both of his hands with her own white fingers. "I fought for my life and your liberty, and I won."

She noticed the emphasis to his words and her eyes fell before his gaze.

Nat saw everything, and a groan of dismay came near forcing its way from his lips.

"She loves him!" cried the guide within his heart. "Gods! am I to be defeated by a boy? He may beat me in open battle, but then—"

Nat did not finish the sentence even to himself.

"I am glad you were so fortunate," said Hattie, as she drew her hands away so that they did not touch the youth's. "But it did not seem that you could overpower that man."

"Fortune favored me. He attempted to hurl me over the edge of the shelf and went over himself while I barely escaped following him."

Hattie turned to her father.

"Father," she cried, "this young man rescued me from the robbers' cave at the risk of his own life. Had it not been for him, I should not have met Nat and been here now."

"She gives him the greater credit!" thought the guide, bitterly.

Martin laid his hand on Roy's shoulder and looked the young miner straight in the face. It was an interesting tableau revealed by the unsteady light of the camp-fire, which had been replenished and was burning brightly. The spectators did not speak.

"My boy," said the overjoyed father, "you have placed me more in your debt than you can imagine. Some time I may be able to square the account."

"Don't mention it, sir," begged the youth, turning crimson and shrinking back a step.

"Am I to be forgotten?" was the question that Nat asked himself.

No. At this moment Hattie turned and saw him. In an instant she had him by the hand and led him forward.

"We must not overlook Nat," she cried.

"He also rescued me from the outlaws' cave."

"Why, how was that?" demanded Holmes, as he turned toward the guide.

"Did you fall into the power of those villains a second time?"

"I did indeed, and but for Nat I should be there now. He saved me."

Martin seized the guide's hand and wrung it warmly.

"Nat," he said, with feeling, "you have my heartfelt gratitude. You know that my child is dearer to me than the apple of my eye."

"I am as much in her debt as she is in mine," asserted the guide. "Had it not been for her I should now be a prisoner myself, and in the hands of my most desperate foes. Captain Hawk has reason to hate me for I once came near causing his death. I exposed him in a little game he was playing, and a gang of Vigilantes had him beneath a tree with a noose around his neck, when some of his men rescued him. When I fell into his hands last night I reckoned my hours were numbered."

Then the entire party sat down beside the fire and Hattie told of her adventures since she was kidnapped from the train, not omitting a point of the story.

Roy was greatly grieved when he heard of Toby's death.

"Poor boy!" said the young miner, sadly. "He was a good-hearted lad."

Both Roy and Dismal were puzzled to know what had become of Jolly Jack.

When Hattie had finished her story, Nebraska Nat told how he came to leave the party the night they entered the Hills.

During this time Parson Perkins had been left to himself, no one paying any heed to the Down-Easter. Suddenly Old Hasty sprang astride the mock Yankee.

"No, ye don't!" cried the '49er, triumphantly. "Reckon I saw ye jest in time."

The Parson had nearly succeeded in freeing himself from the cords which held him.

In a brief space of time Hasty had the prisoner secured more firmly than before, and all the pretended minister of the Gospel could say was: "The Lord's will be done!"

Five minutes later he was sleeping soundly, but the rest of the party did not close their eyes during the remainder of the night.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN UNWELCOME DISCOVERY

WITH the first gray light of morning the party made preparations to move to a different camping-place, Nebraska Nat having proposed to guide them to a spot that would be more secluded and where they would be in less danger from red and white foes.

It was not thought best to make a decided move toward their destination in the Hills till the following day, as Hattie was quite "beat out" by the exciting adventures which she had gone through. Nat said that he thought he could lead them to a spot where they would be comparatively safe. Old Dismal Dan said nothing, although he watched the guide in a peculiar manner.

When they were ready to move, Parson Perkins' feet were released, so that he could walk, and Dan took charge of the suspected man. Big 'Bijah decided to walk, so that Hattie might ride his horse.

Ere sunrise the party made a start; two hours later they reached the place Nat was looking for. It was a secluded spot, indeed, and Dan gave a grunt of satisfaction as he carefully inspected the surroundings.

"How does it strike you?" asked the guide.

"Putty decent like," was the short reply.

The men at once set about building a sort of brush camp for Hattie. It did not take them long to finish quite a commodious and decently-comfortable place where the girl would be secure from observation while she was within. A soft bed of boughs was made, and when everything was complete Hattie thanked the men for their thoughtfulness. Then she went into her new "boudoir," and throwing herself on the soft boughs, quickly fell asleep.

A short time later Holmes approached the little brush hut and listened outside. The girl's regular breathing could be faintly heard, as she was very tired, and therefore breathed heavier than usual. He ventured to peep within and thus satisfied himself that she was sleeping soundly. Nebraska Nat met Holmes as the latter turned away from the brush hut.

"How is she?" inquired the guide, anxiously.

"Sleeping heavily," was the reply.

"I am glad that she is sleeping," said Nat, earnestly. "She needs rest."

"She does, indeed. Poor child! Nat, I shall never forget how great a debt I owe you. She is all I have left, and I feared I had lost her. But for you my worst fears would have been realized."

"You give me too much credit," protested the guide.

Then they turned and walked away together.

The party was composed of some hungry men, and they at once began to prepare breakfast. Dismal Dan and Rifle Roy waited long enough to swallow a few mouthfuls of food, and then started for Wind Canyon to look for Jolly Jack.

It was past mid-day when the old Range Tramp and his young companion returned. They found the little party just where they left them in the morning. They were obliged to report an unsuccessful hunt. Not a trace of Jack could be found. They had been able to gather up the wrecked tent in Wind Canyon, and conceal it in a safe place where they could again find it; but otherwise their tramp had been a failure.

Hattie met Roy as soon as the young miner appeared. The pretty girl was looking much refreshed after her rest, and was smiling and blushing as she offered the youth her hand.

"I am glad you have returned," she said, frankly.

"And I am delighted to see you looking so well," declared Roy, as he clung to her fingers for a moment. "I expected that you would be quite beat out."

"Oh, no!" she laughed. "I feel as good as new, to use one of father's expressions."

For a few moments they stood conversing, and then they walked away together. Nebraska Nat's eyes followed them, and beneath his breath the guide muttered:

"That's right! Throw me over for a strip-ling! Well, we'll see who'll win in the end!"

The young couple went to a convenient spot and sat down. In five minutes' time they were conversing freely.

Old Dismal was watching them, and shook his head solemnly, wiping an imaginary tear from his eye.

"More sorer an' sufferin'," he mumbled. "Ther lad's gittin' gone, an' ther gal's 'bout ez bad orf. That means er double hitch ef they keep tergether; an' er double hitch means ba'r-pullin', jawin', trials, tribbylashuns, an' various other things off ther same piece. W'at a worl' o' mizz-ry an' married misforchune this hyer ole worl' is! Sufferin' Sampson! I sh'u'd say so!"

And still shaking his head, he walked away.

Hattie happened to be looking at the veteran borderman as he turned away, and she said:

"What a strangely solemn old fellow that is!"

"Yes, he is peculiar," Roy admitted. "He always appears just so sad and gloomy, but, although he tells of the terrible afflictions which have befallen him, no one has been able to discover that he has ever endured any very serious calamity. His solemn ways appear to be from mere force of habit. His heart is in the right place, and he was a good friend to me when I came to the West, a homeless, friendless tenderfoot. I shall never forget old Dan's goodness."

"Then you have no parents living?" ventured Hattie.

"I think I have, but I do not know where they are."

"Indeed! You interest me."

She looked at him in a questioning way.

"Yes," he repeated, half-musingly, "I think I have parents living somewhere, although Amos Diskeau always declared that they were both dead."

"Amos Diskeau? What a strange name!"

"Yes, it is peculiar. He was my guardian, and I can truly say that he is a thoroughly bad man. I believe that he kidnapped me from my parents."

"You do?"

She looked into his face in a peculiar way, but, Roy did not notice it.

"Yes," he replied, "I have reasons for believing so. I once heard him tell the old woman, in whose care I then was, that he had stolen me for revenge. I know of no reason why I should doubt his story, as he did not know that I heard him at the time."

Hattie's hands trembled, but she succeeded in concealing every trace of excitement in her voice as she asked:

"How came you to leave this Diskeau?"

"I remained with this old woman in whose charge he left me as long as I could. She was an ugly old creature, but her temper was sweet beside that of my guardian, who seemed to delight in torturing me. How I used to dread his coming! At times he would be away for months, but, when he returned, I suffered. He made up for lost time. Finally, when I could stand it no longer, I ran away."

"What a strange story!" exclaimed the girl. "Pardon me, but I am greatly interested."

"Yes, there are some strange things connected with my life. One thing that always puzzled me, was why Amos Diskeau was very particular that I should attend the best schools. Brutal though he was, and although he always seemed to hate me, he persisted in sending me to school, and, as a result, I have a fair education."

"Singular, indeed."

"Some time," continued Roy, "I hope to find my parents. Once I heard my brutal guardian tell old Mother Graffam—the woman who took charge of me—that I had a twin sister living."

A faint cry came from Hattie's lips, and Roy saw that the girl was white and trembling. Both her white hands were fluttering like the wings of a frightened bird.

"What is the trouble?" he cried, in alarm.

For a moment she could not reply. Finally she succeeded in saying:

"Nothing—nothing! Don't mind me!"

But, he saw that something was the matter. Her very lips were white. After a few moments she regained control of her shaken nerves.

"Mr. Raymond," she said, speaking slowly, "I hope you will pardon me if I ask a singular question. I assure you I have a reason for doing so."

"Certainly; ask it by all means, and I will answer it if it is possible."

"What is your age?"

A singular question indeed, but he promptly replied:

"If Amos Diskeau told the truth, I shall be twenty the tenth day of next January."

"My own birthday!" she almost moaned, as she staggered to her feet.

For a moment he could not understand her emotion, then a thought flashed through his brain.

"Good heavens!" he hoarsely gasped. "Have you lost a twin brother? Did an enemy steal a son from your father's home?"

She dared not trust her voice; she bowed her head.

Roy staggered back a step.

"It cannot be that you are my own sister!" burst from his lips.

She did not speak, but he saw a light in her blue eyes that thrilled him with mingled pain and delight. She loved him and the thought that he might be her brother, instead of being a joyful one, filled her heart with a nameless pain. He read her secret in her eyes and, stepping quickly forward, grasped her hand.

"We will hope," he said, simply.

He did not say that he hoped it would prove that he was not her brother, but that was what he meant.

Ten minutes later the young miner was telling his story to Martin Holmes. Mr. Holmes listened with growing excitement and asked Roy frequent questions. Finally he cried:

"As true as there is a Heaven I believe you are my son!"

But his words brought no thrill of joy to Rifle Roy's heart.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MARTIN FINDS A SON.

FOR nearly an hour Martin Holmes talked with and questioned the young miner. He learned the entire story of Rifle Roy's life back as far as the youth could remember, and had Roy describe the man whom he had known as his guardian, Amos Diskeau. When the young rifle expert had done so, Holmes declared:

"That is an excellent description of Argus Damon, my bitter foe, the man who kidnapped my boy. It needs but little more to confirm my growing belief that you are truly my son."

Behind some bushes near at hand crouched a man on whose face shone a look of joy. He had heard every word that passed between Martin Holmes and the young miner, and the revelation appeared to please him greatly.

The eavesdropper was Nebraska Nat!

As soon as he could move away from the spot without being discovered, he did so.

"Fortune has taken a turn in my favor," he chuckled. "It appears that the boy is really Hattie's brother. If that is so, a very dangerous rival is removed from my path. It is plain that she is more than half in love with the handsome young stripling, but this will put a damper on that kind of business. I hardly wonder that she fell in love with the lad, for he is a smart fellow and has the make-up of a fine man in him. With him out of the way I shall stand a good show if I do not make a fool of myself again and expose my fiery nature so that she will take fright. That is a regular fool-trick of mine."

"I wonder where the girl is? I will find her and be with her when Martin brings the lad along to introduce him to his new sister; then I can offer congratulations on the spot."

He had some difficulty in finding Hattie, but he finally succeeded, and noted with surprise that she had been weeping.

"Wonder what's the matter with her?" he asked himself.

He knew nothing of the conversation between Roy and Hattie, but it did not take him long to guess the truth.

"She knows it," was his mental decision.

Pretending not to notice her tear-wet cheeks, Nat began a lively bit of talk, trying his best to cheer her up. The attempt was a failure, however.

"She takes it to heart bad," thought the guide.

It was not long before Martin Holmes and Roy appeared. One glance at the latter's face told the girl that her fears had good foundation. The young miner looked anything but pleased. Hattie succeeded in wiping away the tear-stains on her face and was apparently chatting pleasantly with Nat when her father and Roy came up.

When Nat would have moved away Mr. Holmes made a motion for him to stay.

"I wish you to hear the story, Nat," said he; "and I wish for your opinion."

It did not take Holmes long to explain the situation, and of course Nat declared that to all appearances Roy was Martin's lost son, following with his congratulations. Holmes was delighted, and his own joy blinded his eyes so that he did not see the restrained and unnatural actions of both the young people, who it now seemed without doubt were brother and sister—twins.

It was not long before the entire camp knew that Martin Holmes had found a son and that Rifle Roy had found a father and sister.

Old Dismal attempted to congratulate the young rifleman, and was amazed when the youth turned on him with flashing eyes, exclaiming in a low, thrilling tone:

"I want no congratulations on my good luck, as you choose to call it! It is not yet settled that I am Mr. Holmes's son, and till it is settled, I am still Royal Raymond. Amos Diskeau said that was my father's name, and it may yet develop that he told the truth."

Then he walked on, leaving Old Dismal both surprised and puzzled.

"Great flusterin' flapjacks!" gasped the Range Tramp; "thet boy don't seem ter be teekled ter death ter fine his daddy an' his beaucherful sin twister—'scuse merself—twin sister. No, I'll be skinned ef he duz! Acts jest like he wuz mad. Thet's too bad—Sufferin' Sampson! thet's too bad! Reckon I ketch w'at's tber matter. Course ther poor lad can't meck luv ter his own natteral-born sister. Weepin' Isreel! hain't thet er gol!"

Shortly after, Dan shouldered his Winchester and left the camp without telling any one where he was going.

Guarded by Old Hasty, Parson Phineas Perkins reclined on the ground in a manner that seemed to indicate a mind at rest. For a while 'Bijah Bigfist amused himself by drawing the Parson into arguments on Bible questions, but he soon tired of that, and rolling into the shade of some bushes, he was soon fast asleep.

Two of the party left camp shortly after they reached the spot where they decided to spend the day, taking their rifles and promising to return with game of some kind ere noon. They kept their promise and came in with plenty of fresh venison to furnish the entire party with two square meals, at least.

Noon passed, but Dan did not return in time to partake of the midday meal. But, near the middle of the afternoon the old tramp appeared.

He was not alone.

In front of Dismal's cocked rifle marched a man, whose arms were tied behind his back. Three men recognized the prisoner the instant he appeared, and the three were Martin Holmes, Parson Perkins and Rifle Roy.

A cry burst from Holmes's lips as his eyes fell upon the captive's face.

"Argus Damon!" he shouted.

"Jest ez I thort," said the old borderman. "This is ther critter w'at tole me his name wuz Noel Kenyon, ther double-tongued fraud!"

"He is Argus Damon, the man who stole my son and ruined my home," declared Holmes, as the party gathered around Dan and his prisoner.

"Ther galoot w'at knocked ye out las' nite?" asked Old Hasty.

"Yes, he is the man."

"Waal, Satan burn him! now you've got him, give him glory," advised 'Bijah.

"Villain! where is my son?" thundered Holmes, seizing the helpless man by the throat. "Answer! Where is he?"

The man smiled his defiance even while gasping for breath as Holmes's fingers closed on his windpipe.

"Answer, you miserable wretch!" shouted the excited man.

"Hole on, pard," advised Hasty. "Not too fast! How'd ye s'pose a man's goin' ter tork w'en yer fingers are grippin' his escape valve in thet thar way?"

Then he dragged Holmes back.

"Release me!" panted the enraged man. "He stole my boy and murdered my wife! I have chased him from place to place; now he is before me. Let me get at him!"

But the '49er held the excited man with ease.

"Hev er leetle jedgment, Holmes," he advised, sharply. "Don't meck er fool o' yerself! Ef ye want ther galoot ter tork, keep yer han's offen his throax. You want ter hear him warble afore you choke him."

The little miner's words brought the excited man to his senses. He cooled down rapidly, and when he again spoke there was no excitement apparent in his voice save a slight falter.

"You are right, Hasty," he admitted. "Let me go. I lost my head for a moment."

The '49er released him promptly enough.

"Argus Damon," said Holmes, stepping forward, "where is my boy?"

"That is for you to find out," laughed the prisoner, sneeringly.

With difficulty Holmes restrained himself and refrained from springing upon the taunting villain. As calmly as possible, he said:

"You had better answer my question, Argus Damon. It will be worse for you if you do not."

"Bah!" sneered the laughing scoundrel. "Your threats are wasted on me."

"You shall find I am in deadly earnest."

"I care not if you are in earnest. I know you of old, Martin Holmes."

"And I know you, you fiend! Would to God I had never seen your false face!"

Damon said nothing but continued to gaze scornfully and defiantly at Holmes. The spectators held their breath and watched the two men.

"And now, after all your crimes, do you dare look me in the face, you dastard?" demanded Martin Holmes.

"I dare anything," was the quick reply. "I would look the Devil himself in the eye if I met him!"

"Will you answer my questions?"

"If I choose."

"Have a care, Damon! Remember you are in my power."

Again that sneering laugh.

"You dare not harm me, Holmes."

"Why not?"

"Because your son is in my power. If you harm me, you shall never see him again."

"You lie, Amos Diskeau!"

Into the circle sprung Rifle Roy to confront the man of many names.

"I am here, Amos Diskeau," continued the young miner. "I escaped from your evil power several years ago."

The helpless villain uttered a cry of amazement.

"You here!" he gasped. "Curse the luck! that trick is played!"

"Yes, that trick is played, Argus Damon alias Amos Diskeau," came from Martin Holmes's lips—"played and you have lost. My son is restored to me alive and well."

"But the game is not ended yet," grated the furious scoundrel. "True you have your son, but I still have a hold on you of which you do not dream."

"Then you acknowledge that this young man is my son whom you kidnapped when a babe?"

"It is useless to deny it now, and so I acknowledge that he is your son. I did not intend that you should ever see his face, but the cards ran against me this deal. But I am still holding my best trick in reserve. When the right time comes, you shall see the cards. I shall triumph in the end, mark my word."

"I believe your wicked career is near an end," declared Holmes, solemnly. "I fancy I see the hand of Providence in the restoration of my son, and think you are about to receive your just deserts."

Then turning to the young rifle expert, he grasped his hand, saying earnestly:

"My dear boy, God has been very good in restoring you to me alive and a perfect model of noble young manhood. It is a miracle that you passed through the furnace and came out without being scorched. There is indeed no doubt but that you are my own son, and Hattie's twin brother."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PARSON UNMASKS.

MARTIN HOLMES was right in believing that the young man whom we have known as Rifle Roy was his son. Damon had spoken the truth when he acknowledged that the young miner was Rolfe Holmes, whom he kidnapped years before. Had he not been surprised into doing so, the villain would not have acknowledged that the youth was Holmes's lost son. The sudden appearance of the young man before Argus had filled the rascal with amazement and dismay. He had betrayed himself by his words and looks before he confessed that the young rifle expert was the kidnapped son, and he was shrewd enough to know that he would not be believed should he deny the truth.

But the man did not lie when he declared that he still had a trick in reserve. What this trick was Martin Holmes little dreamed.

Of course the reader will understand that "Rifle Roy," or properly Rolfe Holmes, was not overjoyed to know that there was no mistake, and that he was truly Martin Holmes's son, and Hattie's brother. Until Damon confessed that he was the kidnapped boy, he had hoped that there might be some mistake; but now his heart felt like lead in his bosom. He had found a father and sister; but—what had he lost?

But the revelations of the day were not yet over.

One of the party announced:

"Parson Perkins wants to see the prisoner."

"What's ther matter with ther Parson?" demanded Old Hasty. "Whar is he?"

The Parson was seated on the ground a short distance away, and at his request, the party quickly gathered around him. The prisoner was brought forward, and when Perkins and Damon were face to face, the former said:

"Gentlemen, this man is known in certain parts of the East as Stephen Sildow, or Slippery Steve."

"Great Moses! ernuther name!" grunted Old Hasty.

"He has cognomens ernuff," observed Big 'Bijah.

"You are right," agreed the Parson, speaking with none of his usual affected manner. "This man is a rascal from the ground up. He is as full of tricks and false names as a dog is full of fleas."

"How about Parson Phineas Perkins?" grinned 'Bijah.

The Parson smiled.

"It sometimes becomes necessary for an honest man to assume a false name," he declared. "You can judge my case when I have told you who I am."

Nebraska Nat stepped forward, saying:

"Pards, let's be quiet and hear what the Parson has to say."

Then the guide threw himself on the ground in a comfortable position and nearly all of the others followed his example. The prisoner also sat down, smiling carelessly all the while. He did not seem in the least alarmed on account of his naturally unpleasant situation.

"Gentlemen," said the Parson, "this man, Stephen Sildow, is a noted bank robber. He is

wanted in various parts of the country for several slick jobs, but, he is well called Slippery Steve. When the officers of the law attempt to put their hands on him he resembles the festive flea—he isn't there."

The listeners became interested at once. Here was another revelation. What would follow?

Damon, as we shall call the arch-scoundrel, did not appear to be in the least disconcerted. He even laughed as Parson Perkins compared him to a flea.

But Dismal Dan was gazing at the Parson in undisguised interest.

"Who in ther name o' Sufferin' Sampson are you?" demanded the old Range Tramp.

The Parson laughed.

"I reckon the time has come for me to unmask," he admitted. "The part of 'Parson Phineas Perkins, frum Varmount' is played out. In fact, it was played out some time ago, but I managed to keep you all at sea by acting in a suspicious manner so that you took me for a rascal in disguise, instead of an officer of the law, as I really am."

"Pashent Job!" muttered Dismal Dan.

The entire party was amazed.

Big 'Bijah burst into a roar of laughter and slapped Old Hasty on the back with one of his enormous hands, causing the little '49er to cringe and make a wry face.

"Haw! haw! haw!" laughed 'Bijah. "This hyer is ther best thung I ever beerd on! W'y, this year leetle dried-up runt tole me not more'n a n'our ergo thet he was sart'in thet the Parson was one o' Cap'n Hawk's men ef not ther chief o' ther gang. Oh, Ole Quickness is er sharp 'un thar's no doubt erbout thet! Haw! haw! haw!"

The little miner's face turned red through the coat of bronze which the weather had given his skin.

"You needn't laff!" he snapped. "You sed you reckoned I was right. You are sharp, you are, you big lummix!"

"And we are not yet sure that you were not both right," asserted Nebraska Nat. "We have only this man's word that he is an officer. Something more is needed."

The pseudo-Parson smiled.

"You shall be satisfied that I speak the truth," he said, quietly. "If you will kindly release my hands, I will produce the required proof in a minute."

Dan promptly cut the cords which held the man's hands.

"Thank you," smiled the man in black.

Then from a secret pocket he produced a fold-paper, which he handed to Martin Holmes, saying:

"Please read that paper, sir. I am the Donald Dare spoken of, sometimes called 'Daring Don.'"

Mr. Holmes studied the paper closely, finally saying to those around:

"There is no doubt but this man speaks the truth. He is the noted detective, surely. We have all been deceived by your clever acting, Mr. Dare, and if we did take you for a Vermont parson, we surely did not dream that you were an officer."

A moment later the cords which held the detective's feet were cut and he was a free man.

Martin Holmes banded the paper back to Dare, and the latter restored it to the hidden pocket.

"Now," said he, "this man, Stephen Sildow, is my game. I have been close after him for some time, but he has managed to keep beyond my grasp. He is badly wanted in a certain town in Pennsylvania, and to that place I intend to take him. I attempted to arrest him yesterday, but we both took a tumble into Satan's Sink and I lost him in the darkness of that dismal hole. I imagine that he escaped from the place first, and as soon as I got out I renewed the search for him."

"And I hoped you were drowned in that warm water lake," declared the cool scoundrel.

"I haven't a doubt of it," laughed Dare; "but I am a mighty hard man to drown. I am here, and I intend to take you back to Pennsylvania."

"Which you will never have the pleasure of doing."

"We will not argue that point."

Holmes suddenly noticed that his newly-found son had withdrawn from the party, and, leaving the men gathered around the detective and his prisoner, he hurried away to find Hattie and Rolf, for he felt sure that the young man had sought his sister. He was right, but he was unprepared for the discovery that he soon made.

He found Hattie alone and weeping as if her heart would break.

"Heavens, Hattie! what is the matter? why are you crying?" he exclaimed, as he hastened forward and caught her in his arms.

But she did not reply at once; she laid her head against his breast and wept bitterly. Finally, after much urging, she faltered:

"Rolf has been here. I have talked with him, and he has told me all."

"Is that what you are crying about?" demanded Mr. Holmes, in amazement. "Are you weeping because you have found a brother?"

She did not reply, but clung close to him and her whole form trembled as she tried to suppress

her emotion. He placed his hand upon her head and caressed her tenderly as he tried to soothe her.

Finally he asked:

"Where is the boy?"

"He has gone," was the broken reply.

"Gone—where?"

"I do not know. He bade me good-by and went away."

Holmes was astounded.

"Why, where can he have gone? I cannot understand this! What could have possessed the boy to leave now?"

Hattie could have explained everything, but of course she did not do so. Had she told her father what passed during the brief time that the young miner was with her after learning from the lips of Argus Damon that he was indeed the lost Rolf, Mr. Holmes would have understood the situation. As it was, he was completely in the dark.

"Did he say when he would return?" asked the amazed man.

"He said he might never come back."

But further questioning failed to reveal to him why the young man had gone away so suddenly. Hattie was careful not to reveal the secret of her heart to her father.

When the news of the boy's departure was circulated through the camp it came to the ears of one man who understood why the young rifle expert had so suddenly disappeared.

That man was Nebraska Nat.

"Ah-ha!" he chuckled. "My only rival is disposed of, and, now the coast is clear, I can win the love of the fair girl who has so bewitched me. Good!"

As soon as he heard of the youth's departure, Dismal Dan threw his rifle over his shoulder and, without saying a word to any one, strode out of the camp. No one ventured to ask where he was going, but all felt that he intended to hunt for the boy.

The afternoon dragged slowly away and at dusk Dismal returned; but the youth was not with him, and it seemed that his long face looked longer and sadder than usual.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AT THE HIDDEN CABIN.

CRAZY MOSE kept his word and did not leave Jolly Jack alone long. When the man of the lone cabin returned he found the young miner reclining on the bear's skin, apparently quite at ease. Crazy Mose entered the dungeon and carefully closed the door behind him. Jack sat up, a look of eagerness on his face.

"Young man," said the hermit, impressively, "I have spoken to Alsie of you, and she has persuaded me to deal gently with you. But for her you would be dead before this. I fear that I am foolish, but I have promised her that you shall not be harmed unless you make an attempt to escape. If you try that, your fate will be sealed."

Jack would have said something, but the hermit checked him with a gesture.

"I know you would thank me. Save your thanks for her. I have no relish for such. But, let me tell you what we have decided to do. Your face looks honest, and at her request, I have decided to allow you in the cabin on parole, as it were. How does that suit you?"

Jack thought of the beautiful girl who had apparently taken such an interest in him and replied that it would suit him quite well. The hermit was watching him closely, and seemed to read his thoughts, for he instantly said:

"You will have to make several promises before you can be allowed above. You must know from what you have seen and what I have told you that the beautiful wild flower above is dearer than life to me. Should harm come to her, it would kill me, and should I know of anyone entertaining even an evil thought of her it would be well for him to keep beyond my reach."

The young miner shivered as the hermit fastened his piercing eyes upon him.

"If you go above," continued the denizen of Wind Canyon, "you will have to promise to make no attempt at escape. You will be permitted in the cabin by day, but will have to sleep here nights, securely locked in. What do you say to that?"

Jack asked for a minute's consideration.

"I would like to let my friends know that I am alive and well."

A dark look settled on the hermit's face.

"Such a thing will be impossible," he declared, decisively. "It would only set them to searching for you. You will have to give up that desire."

"I am in your power and will have to do as you say."

"That is sensible. You will be given the freedom of the cabin, and only at night will you actually be a prisoner."

"How long shall I have to remain here?"

"That I cannot tell. If you do not attempt to play me foul, I may finally decide to let you depart, trusting to your honor not to reveal the secret of our hidden retreat."

"I promise to make no attempt to escape during the daytime while I am on parole," assented Jack, candidly.

"And you also promise not to try to attract

the attention of any of your friends, should you see them in the canyon below?"

"I do."

"That is all. If you will break your word, you would not keep your Bible oath. Come!" and turning, he led the way from the dungeon, Jack following close at his heels. Ascending the ladder, they found themselves once more in the cabin.

The beautiful Alsie looked delighted as she saw that the young miner was following the gray-beard. Jack's head fairly swam as he saw how handsome she was, for she now seemed more dazzling than before.

"Heavens!" flashed through the young man's mind. "If she is as beautiful in that dress, what would she be in fashionable attire?"

Learning Jack's name, the old man formally presented him to the girl. For a moment their fingers touched and again the young miner felt a thrill run over him. He also noticed that the girl's face grew crimson once more.

Fortunately the hermit saw nothing of this, for had he observed it, he might have thought that he made a mistake in allowing the young man in the cabin.

Jack was given a chair, and the hermit and girl also sat down. Then began a conversation which was constrained and awkward at first, but gradually became more free. The girl said very little, but the hermit talked almost incessantly. Jack soon discovered that he was an educated man.

Night was at hand and soon it grew dark in the little cabin, but neither the hermit or the girl made a move to light a lamp. Finally the old man explained that they seldom ventured to have a light in the cabin, fearing that it might betray their secret hiding-place to foes.

Presently the lone resident proposed that Jack return to the dungeon to spend the night. But first he sent the girl down below to prepare a bed.

When Jack signified a willingness to "retire," the man led the way down below. They found a lamp on a rocky shelf. This the hermit took up, saying as he did so:

"Perhaps you have wondered how I leave this place when I do not use the arrangement for descending into the canyon. Look."

With one hand he pointed to a passage that led away into the solid rock!

"That leads to a secret exit. Whether it is the work of nature or not I cannot say, but it was there when I discovered this cliff."

Five minutes later, Jack found himself alone in the dungeon. The hermit had locked the door and gone away, bidding him good-night. But to the young miner's intense satisfaction he saw before him a comfortable bed of furs and blankets.

"Bless her sweet face!" muttered the youth. "Here is a bed fit for a king! For all of the fact that I am a prisoner in the hands of a crazy man, I am going to put in a good night's rest. I may need to be fresh to-morrow, for there is no telling what the day may bring forth."

Regardless of his position, Jolly Jack was soon asleep. All that night he dreamed of the beautiful girl whom he had so lately seen. And all that night the girl dreamed of the young miner confined in the hermit's dungeon.

On the following day Jack was once more permitted to ascend into the cabin. Soon after the morning meal the hermit departed, leaving the young folks together.

There was plenty of talk to Jolly Jack when he once got started, and it was not long before he and the girl were chatting pleasantly. The young miner soon discovered that Crazy Mose told the truth when he said that Alsie had been given a good education. She conversed freely on almost any topic, and the more Jack saw of her the greater became his admiration. The hours slipped swiftly away and noon came before they were aware of it.

The hermit did not return to dinner, which gave Alsie no alarm, for she said that he often remained away whole days—sometimes several days—at a time.

The young people enjoyed a dinner by themselves, and enjoy it they did—at least, Jack did. What merry things they said! How they laughed, taking care not to be heard by any one who might be in the canyon! And as Jack watched Alsie's white fingers clearing away the food and dishes, he swore to himself that she was a jewel, indeed.

It was truly a hopeless case with Jack.

And if the young miner read the girl's face, voice and acts aright, she was little better off, although it was evident that she tried to disguise her feelings. But Alsie knew little of the coquettish arts of her fashionable sisters, and therefore was unable to disguise her emotions as she might otherwise have done.

Night was at hand when the hermit returned. As soon as Crazy Mose appeared it became apparent that he was in a state of great excitement.

"Alsie," he cried, "both your enemy and mine are near. I have seen Ruel Darrow, and I have also seen Noel Kenyon, who left you in my care when you were a mere babe."

The girl turned pale and sprung to his side.

"But those evil men cannot find us, father!" she exclaimed. "Surely we are safe here!"

Crazy Mose shook his head.

"I am not so sure of that," he said. "One has found our retreat; others may follow."

But little he dreamed how soon the hidden cabin was to be discovered by one of the very men he had mentioned.

Jack spent another night in the dungeon, and was released at day-dawn by the white-bearded hermit.

"Young man," said Mose, earnestly, "I am going away from the cabin, and I leave Alsie in your care. Be watchful that no harm comes to her."

"I will protect her with my life," declared the young miner.

Then Crazy Mose pressed his hand and turned away.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WORK OF A WRETCH.

WHEN the hermit had disappeared in the darkness of the passage, Jack took up his lamp and advanced to the steps which led up into the hidden cabin. The trap-door was open, and, seeing this, the young man extinguished the light before ascending.

He found Alsie in the cabin busying herself about some small household duties. She greeted the young man pleasantly, but could not repress the rosy blush which sprung to her cheeks.

A dash of cold water made Jack feel like a new man, and he heartily relished the food which his fair hostess had prepared for his breakfast.

Finally Jack ventured to inquire:

"Where has your father gone? Miss Mason?"

"He has gone to search for Ruel Darrow, the man who robbed and tried to murder him in California," she replied. "If he finds his false friend, the dungeon will have a different occupant and you will be obliged to sleep there no longer."

"But your father may take a fancy to put me in a worse place," laughed the youth.

"There is little danger of that. The chances are that he will give you your liberty on condition that you will not tell of this hidden retreat."

"I am not so sure that I want my liberty," declared Jack, looking her full in the face.

"Do not want your liberty—why?"

She stopped suddenly, for she seemed to understand the strange look on his face.

"If given my liberty, I shall have to go away from here," said Jack, significantly.

"I should think you would be glad to leave the place," she faltered, with her eyes fastened on the floor.

Jack grew bold.

"But I am not glad to leave the place, for one reason. Do you want to know that reason?"

For an instant her cheeks would have shamed a red rose, then the crimson tide receded, leaving her pale and trembling. Jack saw her emotion and found his way to her side.

"Alsie!" he whispered.

Slowly the color stole back to her cheeks, but she did not stir or look up. The young man could see that she was still trembling.

"If you will not be offended, I will tell you why I do not want to go away."

She made no sign, and Jack declared:

"I hate to go away because I shall have to leave you behind."

Once more her cheeks were red, and her head hung still lower. How brave Jack Dillon became! Quietly his arm stole around her waist, and he bent his head till his lips were close to her ear.

"Alsie!" he whispered again.

He felt her tremble, but still she made no attempt to move away from him.

"I do not want to go away and leave you behind—I cannot! For all of the fact that I am a prisoner here some of the pleasantest moments of my life have been spent in this little cabin. Wherever I might go in the wide world, my thoughts would return to this hidden retreat, so long as you remained here, and I would wish to hasten back to this spot."

He paused, but still she did not stir or speak.

"Alsie, do you want me to go away?"

She attempted to lift her head to reply, but it fell again, and she trembled more violently than before. Jack saw that she could not speak, and his heart thrilled with delight. Surely she loved him, or she would not be so moved.

"What is it, little one?" he asked, softly. "If you do not want me to go away, speak my name. I will know what you mean."

"Jack!"

How that whispered word thrilled him! Never before till he heard it softly spoken by her sweet lips had he dreamed how well his name sounded. She did not look up, but like the murmur of a brook faintly heard, that one word came to his ears.

He drew her closer, his heart leaping in an ecstasy of delight.

"Alsie," he said, gently, "I love you!"

There was a moment of silence, and then he added:

"I believe I loved you the very first time I saw you in the moonlight near our tent in the canyon. My dreams have been of you ever since. The more I see of you the stronger becomes my passion. But till a few moments ago I have not dared to hope that you might love me as I do you. Now I am bold enough to entertain such a hope. Alsie, do you love me?"

For a short time she did not attempt to reply. Then she lifted her head a little, and—

"Jack, I love you!"

And then, with the impetuosity of youth, the young miner lifted her face till he could look fairly into her eyes. The next instant their lips met with the first warm kiss of true love.

The spell was broken. With a little cry of mingled fear and consternation, she sprang away from him, her cheeks flaming crimson. He did not attempt to detain her, for he knew that it would be folly to do so.

"What have I said—what have I done?" she faltered. "Father—what would he say?"

She seemed on the point of breaking into tears as she buried her face in her hands. Softly Jack advanced to her side.

"Alsie!" he said again.

"Don't call me that!" she gasped; "don't! You must go away from here—you must go!"

He was amazed. A few moments before she had virtually told him that she did not want him to go away.

"Why, what do you mean?" he asked.

"I don't know—I don't know," she sobbed. "We can be nothing to each other. I must stay with father! He would not want me to go away. Oh, I wish I had never seen you!"

Once more the young miner came near enough to pass his arm around her waist, and draw her to him. She did not offer any resistance.

"Don't cry, little one!" he implored. "Perhaps some arrangement can be made."

"Ha! ha! ha! Very likely!"

A harsh, unpleasant voice, filled with savage triumph.

Jack whirled quick as a flash to confront a tall dark-faced man who had silently entered the cabin through the open trap-door.

Argus Damon!

One of the men whom the hermit feared had indeed found the hidden cabin.

"So I interrupted a little love-scene did I?" sneered the villain.

"Who are you?" demanded Jolly Jack; "and how came you here?"

"I will answer your last question first. I came here by the way of this underground passage, having been fortunate enough to see Crazy Mose when he went out. But for that little piece of luck, I might not have found the entrance to the passage."

"How dared you come here?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" the man laughed again. "How dared I? Why, young fellow, there is not much daring to that."

"If you think so, you do not know Crazy Mose. Your life will pay the penalty of your inquisitiveness if he finds you here."

"But he won't find me, you see. I shall be far away when he returns, and that girl will go with me."

Alsie drew nearer the young miner as if for protection.

"Jack, Jack," she whispered, "look out! He is a bad man and means to do something terrible."

"Don't fear; he shall not touch you," replied the youth, sturdily.

Again the intruder laughed.

"You talk mighty big, young fellow, but I fancy it is all talk. When I leave the cabin, that girl goes with me."

"Then you will never leave this cabin."

"Oh, yes I shall! It is evident that you do not know me."

"No, I cannot lay claim to so much honor," sneered Jack.

"Well, then, I will tell you who I am. My name is Noel Kenyon, and I am that girl's lawful guardian."

Alsie uttered a cry of fear and pressed closer to the young miner's side. Jack passed his left arm around her waist, saying softly:

"Don't be frightened; he shall not lay a hand on you while I am able to move."

And then to Argus Damon:

"It makes no difference if you are her father; if she does not want to go with you, she shall not."

The defied wretch scowled blackly.

"If you dare to step in my way, you shall die!" he grated.

"Bah! I do not fear you in the least."

"That is because you do not know me. If you did, you would know that I never break my word, and I swear that that girl leaves this cabin with me."

"If you take her away, you will have to leave a corpse behind."

"I can do that if necessary, but I hope you will not be foolish. Stand aside!"

Damon advanced threateningly, but instead of standing aside, Jack thrust the girl behind him and prepared for battle. He suddenly remembered that the hermit had deprived him of his weapons, but he decided to use those that nature gave him, and fight for all he was worth.

Seeing that the young miner meant fight, Damon rushed forward, thinking to overpower him at once.

He received a surprising shock.

Out flew the young man's fist, striking the villain fairly between the eyes, and Damon reeled back with a cry of pain and rage. The next instant a revolver seemed to spring into his hand and a sharp report echoed through the hidden cabin.

Without a cry or a groan, Jolly Jack threw up his hands and fell heavily to the floor!

"There, curse you!" hissed the treacherous wretch. "That fixes you. You got that bullet plumb in the head!"

The girl uttered a shriek and would have fallen had not Damon caught her in his arms.

"Fainted dead away!" he exclaimed. "So much the better, for she will give me less trouble."

Five minutes later the hidden cabin was deserted save for the motionless form that lay on the floor. And as the minutes crept by, that silent form lay there like one dead, and a crimson line ran down across his forehead to form a tiny pool upon the white floor.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A TRAITOR'S TRICK.

THE following morning after "Rifle Roy"—whom I shall hereafter call Rolf Holmes—left the place where he had found a father and sister, it was discovered that Argus Damon was missing. The villain had been bound securely, hand and foot, but when morning came only some severed cords remained where the man had been the night before!

Of course this discovery caused considerable excitement, and every one seemed anxious to learn how the desperate rascal had worked the trick.

There had been two guards the entire night, and nearly every man had been on duty at some time between sunset and sunrise. If they all told the truth, not one of them had seen a suspicious move around the camp.

And yet it was plainly evident that the prisoner had been assisted to escape.

There was a traitor in camp!

The detective, Donald Dare, seemed to be the coolest man among those who learned that Damon was missing. Indeed, he was so calm that many of the party regarded him with wonder. But Dare was making a few inquiries and listening attentively to the talk of those around him.

"Pards," cried Old Hasty, "this hyer is a dirty trick an' no mistook. It don't seem possible that thar's er cuss in this crowd low down ernuff ter let that skunk loose."

'Bijah nudged the little Californian in the ribs with his thumb, saying in a stage whisper:

"Sh! Let up, ole man, fer Heaving's sake! You're drawin' s'picious onter yerself. They all know you're ther meanest galoot in ther gang!"

Without noticing 'Bijah, the '49er added:

"This hyer's er dirty trick, shore, an' though it pains me ter say it, I'm erfraid I know ther miser'ble, overgrown, big-fisted whelp w'at dun' it. If it turns out that he did, I'm red dy ter help string him ter ther nearest tree, even though he has been my pard."

"Oh, Lawd!" gasped the big Californian.

"Gentlemen," cried Nebraska Nat, sharply, "this is no time for cheap talk. We must do our best to discover *who* the traitor is."

"That is right," came the decisive voice of Daring Don. "And, in order to learn the truth, we had better organize a court of investigation, as it were."

"I think you are right," bowed the guide, keeping his eyes fastened on the detective in a manner that was not far from suspicious. "Perhaps you know best how to do such a thing."

Dare made no reply, but proceeded to gather the party around him, and then, one by one, he questioned them. Nebraska Nat came last, and the detective questioned him more closely than he had the others. He had learned nothing from those that went before, but he seemed determined to trap the guide in some way. But to those listening Nat seemed to tell a very straight story. None of the party were prepared for what followed.

Pointing his finger straight at Nebraska Nat, Donald Dare cried:

"Gentlemen, that man is the traitor!"

This startling declaration electrified every man. The accused leaped forward with clinched hands and flashing eyes.

"What do you mean, sir?" he demanded in ringing tones.

"Just what I said," was the calm reply.

"You are the man who cut the cords that bound the prisoner, and you helped him to escape!"

For a moment Nat was speechless with anger and astonishment. Then his rage broke forth like a sudden flame.

"You lie, you dog!" he cried. "Take back your words, or by the gods! I will cram them down your throat!"

"Oh, no you won't," smiled Dare, quite unruffled. "Not a word will I take back. You—*are—the—man!*"

For a moment Nat seemed on the point of

hurling himself upon the detective, but he restrained himself and turned to the amazed spectators.

"Gentlemen," he cried, "I call on you to judge between us. This man has accused me of being the traitor. Where is his proof? He has none. Did any of you find anything wrong with my story? Was there one suspicious point?"

Donald laughed.

"Oh, no: there was nothing crooked about the story—apparently. It was cleverly arranged and well told, but you cannot wool me in that way. There is not another man in the party who would release Slippery Steve. You did the job, Nathan."

"But I fancy you will have to prove that before these intelligent men believe that I did so foul a trick. You have played your part well, but you cannot deceive me. You accuse me of releasing the prisoner! So bold a move is worthy of the consummate rascal that I believe you to be!"

"Gentlemen, that man is no more a detective than I am! He has deceived you. He is playing a clever game, but I intend to block it."

"But the paper!" exclaimed Martin Holmes.

"It's a forgery without doubt," asserted the guide. "I doubted its genuineness at first, but you all seemed willing to accept it for the real article, and so I held my peace."

"Weepin' Isreel! thet *may* be so!" muttered Old Dismal.

"You are making a bold accusation, Nat," said Holmes.

"I am ready to stand by my words. He accused me of releasing the prisoner, and now I am going to speak out what I really believe. I have not a doubt but that this pretended detective released the prisoner himself."

Old Hasty nodded vigorously.

"Bet a hoss you're right!" he muttered.

As for Donald Dare—if that was really his name—he seemed both amused and amazed at this accusation. But he lost little of his coolness.

"That is what I call cast-iron cheek," he observed.

"You will remember," continued Nebraska Nat, "that this man who accuses me of being a traitor has been playing a part all along—has been trying to deceive you. When he failed as Parson Perkins, he came out as Donald Dare. He was evidently all ready to change his guise if the occasion required. He was in a tight corner, and saw his chance to get out—a chance which he did not fail to improve. Think of his suspicious actions in the past. How does he explain them? Why, he says he acted suspicious for the purpose of deceiving you. A likely story!"

A muttering of approval went around the circle. Nat did not wait for the detective to say a word, but continued:

"Without doubt the prisoner was a friend of his, and he saw a chance to set him free. You will remember how coolly he acted when he learned that Damon, or whatever his name is, was gone. He did not seem excited in the least, although last night he pretended to be an officer after Damon for a bank robbery, or something of that sort. Then this pretended detective organizes a 'court of inquiry' and sets himself up as judge. He asks a few questions; discovers nothing; and pronounces me the traitor. Would it not be a good thing to examine him a little?"

While the guide was talking, Donald Dare said not a word, but he watched the excited man in a way that was both cool and aggravating. When Nat had finished, he asked:

"Are you all through?"

Nat bowed.

"I am glad, for your talk makes me exceedingly tired. At the same time I admire your cheek. But cheek don't always win. As for the genuineness of the paper which Mr. Holmes examined, I have no way of proving it so. But I do not fancy there will be any trouble about that. It is genuine, and that settles it."

"P'raps it duz, an' then erg'in," grunted Old Hasty.

"By smoke! I begin ter believe thet we hev bin token in by thet thar black-coated critter!" declared 'Bijah softly.

"Same hyer," nodded the '49er.

As a final result, the "court of investigation" was obliged to acknowledge that it had not sufficient proof to convict any one. But at the same time the entire crowd looked with suspicion on the self-styled detective. Nebraska Nat's words had had weight.

As for Nat and Donald Dare, they were open enemies from the time that the latter accused the guide of being the traitor. They did not come to blows, although the entire party felt that such a result was impending.

But, Dare did not give the guide a chance to bring on a fight. How he succeeded in sneaking away without any one seeing him was a mystery, but it was suddenly discovered that he was missing. No one knew when he went or how, but the fact that he was gone was quite apparent.

"I knowed it," nodded Old Hasty, grimly. "Ther blamed critter wooled us all. 'Reckon

we was right w'en we tuck him fer Cap'n Hawk."

"Sufferin' Sampson! thar hain't er doubt o' it," was Dismal Dan's decision. "W'at fer did thar blamed critter sneak orf ef thar wuzn't suthin' in it?"

"I was almost positive that he released the prisoner last night," Nat declared. "He accused me in order to draw suspicions from himself."

"We made er big mistook in lettin' ther two-faced skunk git erway," put in Bigfist.

"Now you're torkin' fer oncet," grunted the '49er.

"But if he is this robber-chief, are we not in danger if we remain here?" asked Holmes. "He may bring his whole band down on us."

"That is true," assented Nat. "Of course there is a possibility that he is not Captain Hawk, although he released the prisoner without doubt. He may be in this vicinity. I am going out to look round. If I see nothing of this professed detective, I shall think that we're in some danger and will return and lead you to another spot. Be prepared to move when I return for it may be necessary to git lively."

The guide left the camp. Without saying a word to any one or letting Nat know that he was doing so, Dismal Dan followed like a shadow at his heels.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

JOLLY JACK ON HAND.

In a deep and narrow gorge of the Black Hills stood an old and deserted cabin. To that cabin Argus Damon, the treacherous friend and double-faced villain, carried the beautiful girl who had once more fallen into his power. In some manner Damon had obtained possession of a powerful horse, and therefore the task of removing his captive from the secret exit to the underground passage which led to the hermit's cabin was not a difficult one.

When she recovered consciousness Alsie found herself on a horse's back, held fast in the strong arms of the man whom she believed to be her worst foe. But she was weak and helpless, and she knew that to struggle would be folly, so she made no attempt to escape. So still she remained that her captor did not know that she had recovered consciousness.

At first her mind did not seem to comprehend all that had happened. She knew that she was a prisoner, or captive, and was being conveyed somewhere by her enemy, but she did not seem to remember how she came to be in such a predicament. Gradually everything came back to her.

At first she remembered how Jack Dillon had discovered the hidden cabin and fallen into the power of Crazy Mose. She had saved the young man from the knife that Mose would have buried in his breast, and then Jack had been confined in the dungeon, a prisoner. She had interceded in his behalf, and had finally persuaded the hermit to allow him in the cabin. Then what had followed? Her heart leaped with delight as she remembered how the young miner had declared his love for her. The next instant came the terrible remembrance of the unexpected interruption and the treacherous shot that stretched Jolly Jack lifeless on the floor, as she believed.

With a cry of horror she struggled faintly to escape from the strong arms which held her, the arms of a murderer!

"Helloa!" exclaimed Damon. "So my beautiful ward has recovered, has she? I am glad of that."

"Let me go!" gasped the poor girl.

The man laughed.

"I couldn't think of it just now," he said. "Now that I have recovered possession of you, I mean to keep you."

"But you are a villain—a—"

"Now, has Mose Mason been filling your ears with that kind of stuff? He is a fine man to leave a child with! I reckon people are right who say he is as crazy as a March hare."

"But you—you killed him—you shot him down; I saw you!"

"Shot Crazy Mose? My dear girl, you are very much mistaken. I have not been fortunate enough to get my eyes on the man."

"No, no! not him! I saw you shoot Jack—you monster!"

Argus Damon gave vent to a short whistle of surprise.

"So that is what you are driving at. I might have known. That young fellow was your lover. Well, I had to dispose of him some way."

"But you murdered him!"

"I reckon not quite so bad as that. I shot to knock him out, and if I did not make a mistake he is all right by this time."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I creased him, as they call it out here in the West—sent the bullet along his skull, but did not kill him."

The villain did not dream that he was telling the truth. He had shot to kill Jolly Jack, but had "creased" him by accident. Had he paused to examine the wound, he would have discovered this; but he was in a great hurry to get away from the hidden cabin before the hermit

returned, and so the young miner's life was spared.

Alsie doubted the man's word, but at the same time she hoped that he was telling the truth.

When they reached the deserted cabin, Damon thrust the girl into the dismal old place and closed the door while he looked after his horse.

When he returned he found the girl in tears. Instantly he did his best to console her.

"Don't cry," he entreated. "You need have no fear of me, for I will not harm you. I am your lawful guardian, and I shall see that you are taken good care of. You have been with that crazy old hermit too long for your good. The idea of burying a beautiful girl like you in such a place as I found you is simply condemnable!"

But his words seemed to make no impression on her.

"I am going to take you away from here where you can see something of the world," continued the smooth-tongued rascal. "You are a beautiful girl, fit to break scores of hearts. I did not dream that you were so beautiful. What a shame for such as you to spend your days in these solitudes with that old man as your only companion."

"Alsie, listen to me. Your mother was beautiful before you, but never was she your equal. I loved your mother, but she became the wife of another. The loss nearly drove me crazy, but, like most defeated lovers, I managed to survive. Neither your father or mother lived very long. On her death-bed your mother gave you into my care. Of course you know how I came to leave you with Moses Mason and his wife, but I know not what kind of a story he told you concerning me. It is plain that he told you something to imbitter you against me. Whatever he said was probably false."

"Now that you know the truth, you should see that I have a right to take you away, and it is my duty to do so. I hope you will believe me when I say that I am doing what I know to be for your good."

Yet for all of his smooth words, she could not help feeling that he was her enemy, not her friend. When he approached and attempted to lay his hand on her head she shrunk from him. He noticed this and a hard look came over his face.

"Alsie," he said, "don't you believe what I have told you?"

"I don't know," she sobbed—"I don't know what to think."

"And I don't know how to convince you that I have told the truth. In time you will learn that I have not tried to deceive you. I shall take you far away from these Hills."

"Oh, I cannot go without seeing father!"

"So crazy Mose has taught you to call him father, has he? Thank Heaven! he is not your father. I have no desire to meet the man who has thus deceived you."

Which was the literal truth.

"But he told me that he was not my true father," said the girl, quickly. "He seemed like a father, and as I knew no other parent, I called him so."

"For all of that, I am sure that Moses Mason deceived you. He led you to believe that I was your enemy, while, in truth, I am your best friend."

And then the wily scoundrel tried once more to comfort the weeping girl.

About three hours after they reached the cabin a sharp clatter of hoofs was heard, and a horseman drew up at the door.

"Hello, in there!" hailed a clear voice.

Revolver in hand, Damon opened the door. He uttered an exclamation of surprise as he saw the horseman.

"What in the name of sin have you got that mask on for?" demanded the man with the revolver.

The horseman laughed.

"It is well to have your face covered at times if you follow my profession," was his answer.

"Your profession?"

"That's what I said."

"What is it?"

"Doctoring pocketbooks and relieving tired travelers of corrupt purses."

Then both men laughed.

"You see I follered your directions and found this cabin," said Damon.

"Yes, I knew you could not miss it. There was a devil of a row when it was discovered that you had taken your departure. We had a very warm time of it."

"I expected you would. I am in your debt for assisting me to get away, and I'll not forget it."

"Don't say a word about it; it was fun for me. I have had considerable sport in deceiving that gang, but I reckon my game is on its last legs. If I am not mistaken, Captain Hawk's band will call on them to-night."

Damon started.

"By gracious, man!" he cried; "I believe you are Captain Hawk!"

"You are greatly mistaken, then, for I am not," was the quiet reply. "I do not deny that I am one of the Gold Hawks, but I am not the chief. Captain Hawk is a man heard of a great

deal more often than seen. And, like a lively flea, he is mighty hard to catch."

Suddenly Damon seemed to remember that the girl in the cabin was hearing every word of this conversation, and with a muttered curse at his thoughtlessness, he stepped out and closed the door, fastening it securely behind him. Then the two men moved away a short distance, so that not a word of their talk reached Alsie's ears.

"Heaven save me!" gasped the beautiful captive. "Now I know that I am in the power of a villain! That man on the horse was one of the desperadoes known as the Gold Hawks and the one who professes to be my guardian is on friendly terms with him. That is enough to convince me that father did not tell what was false when he said that Noel Kenyon was a villain. Without doubt he murdered Jack—poor Jack! His story that he only stunned him was made to fit the occasion. Ah! what am I to do?"

After a time, Damon returned to the cabin. He found Alsie sitting by the window staring out into the gloomy gorge in a way that seemed to indicate that her thoughts were far away. He did not venture to disturb her, but turned and silently left the cabin once more.

How long the girl sat thus she could not tell, but she was finally aroused by a loud cry, a revolver-shot and a heavy fall near the cabin door. She sprang to another window and looked out.

A most astonishing sight met her gaze.

Damon was lying flat upon his back, and holding him perfectly helpless was Crazy Mose, the hermit!

The next instant the door was hurled open, and into the room sprang Jolly Jack, to catch her in his arms and kiss her on the lips. With one wild cry of joy she sunk helpless on his breast.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FORCED TO FIGHT.

THERE was much uneasiness in the camp of the survivors from the ill-fated wagon-train, after Nebraska Nat and old Dismal Dan had departed. The little party felt that they were in great danger while they remained there, for if the man who had called himself Donald Dare was really one of the Gold Hawks, he might bring the band of border vultures down upon the camp at any time.

Martin Holmes sought his daughter's side, and told her of everything that had passed, requesting her to be ready to move at a moment's notice, as they might be required to do.

"The absence of Rolf worries me greatly," Martin declared. "I cannot understand why he should do so strange a thing."

But although she could have explained, Hattie did not do so.

Slowly the forenoon wore away, but neither Nebraska Nat nor Old Dismal reappeared. The entire party was restless and on the alert. Near noon they held a "council of war," to determine what should be done. One or two were for moving from the place at once, but the others opposed it.

"We'd better stay right whar we are till we hear frum Nat or Old Solemncholy," said 'Bijah Bigfist.

"Ye'r' right, pard," agreed Old Hasty. "We w'u'dn't know jest whar ter go ef we sh'u'd move." Nat sed fer us ter keep quiet till he kem'back, an' we'd better do so."

This the party finally decided was the best thing they could do.

The sun passed the meridian, and was slowly creeping toward the western peaks when Hattie had a thrilling adventure. She had wandered a short distance from the camp, but was still in full view of the party, when, without the least warning, a horseman swept out of some bushes and came dashing down the slope toward her. Hattie uttered a cry of terror when she saw that the man's face was covered by a mask, and turned to run. Then her foot caught in a creeping vine, and she fell to the ground!

In a moment she was upon her feet, but the horseman had almost reached her.

Then a strange thing occurred.

Out into plain view of the spectators sprang a tall Indian, who carried a rifle in his hand. Up to the red-skin's shoulder leaped the rifle, and from the muzzle sprang a puff of smoke!

Then the horse which the masked man bestrode went down, flinging the rider far over its head.

The Indian had shot the horse!

Hattie saw the tall red-skin and recognized him. It was Soft Heart!

The little party of amazed spectators expected to see the Indian turn his rifle on the girl, but nothing of the kind occurred. Soft Heart, watching the girl a minute, turned and disappeared into the bushes.

At about the same time the masked horseman arose to his feet, and, after one glance toward Hattie, wheeled and ran swiftly toward cover. Evidently he had given up his scheme, whatever it was.

"Great Moses! see him leg it!" exclaimed Bigfist.

"Look! there is ther boy—Leetle Blue-Eyes' brother!" cried Old Hasty.

The '49er pointed toward a distant hillside, and looking in that direction, every one saw Rolf Holmes. The young rifle expert had his eyes on the fleeing man, and the spectators saw him suddenly throw his rifle to his shoulder.

Then a sharp report echoed through the valley.

The running man was seen to dodge to one side, but he still dashed onward, and soon disappeared from view. It was apparent that the young miner had not shot to kill, but had sent a bullet whistling past the man's ear to hasten him on.

Then Rolf ran down the slope and joined Hattie.

A suppressed cheer arose from the witnesses of these exciting occurrences.

"Thank God!" burst from Martin Holmes's lips. "My daughter is safe!"

"But who in their name o' their seven sleepers was that red?" Big 'Bijah asked.

"Dunno," replied Old Hasty, curtly. "Ask ther gal."

The meeting between Rolf and Hattie was touching. The young man grasped her extended hand and gazed straight into her blue eyes. For a moment the temptation to catch her in his arms was almost ungovernable, but he succeeded in holding himself in check.

"Hattie!" he breathed in a whisper.

"Rolf," she said, softly, "I am so glad you have returned!"

"I could not stay away!" he declared, hoarsely. "It seemed that I must come back if it killed me!"

"I feared you would not."

"I could not help it. It seemed that you were calling to me and I must return."

"In my mind I did call to you," she confessed.

"I kept saying over and over: 'Rolf, come back.'"

"And those were the very words which I seemed to hear," declared the youth. "They kept ringing in my ears till I turned this way."

"You will not go away again?"

He shook his head.

"I do not know; I cannot tell."

"Don't—please don't!"

At this moment they observed that Martin Holmes and several of the party were advancing toward them.

"Come," said Rolf, "we must meet them. Do not let them suspect our secret."

Holmes's delight was unbounded. He clasped both of his children in his arms and thanked God for his goodness. And, with uncovered heads, both Old Hasty and 'Bijah Bigfist said:

"Amen!"

Of course Rolf's father asked the young man why he had gone away, and the youth made a plausible excuse. Then they went back to the camp, if the place where they were stopping could be dignified by such a name.

The entire party were now decidedly restless. The recent events had added much to their alarm.

As soon as he learned how things stood, Rolf Holmes volunteered to lead the party to another place.

"But how about Nat and Old Dismal?" asked one.

"I will risk Dan," was the youth's reply. "He will find us when he wants to. We need not worry about him in the least."

"Then let's move as soon as possible," urged Martin Holmes.

In a short time they were ready to start, and guided by the young miner, they left the place. Rolf was quite familiar with that part of the Hills, and led them along without any hesitation. At nightfall they were encamped a long distance away.

"Do you think that we are in any danger here, my son?" asked Mr. Holmes.

"I cannot say," replied Rolf. "The Hills suddenly seem to be swarming with red-skins and white outlaws. We may have been watched. If so, the chance is that we will have to fight for our lives before morning. I wish that Dan was here. He would know just what to do."

But when darkness had settled over the hills the old Range Tramp was still absent. Neither had Nebraska Nat appeared.

"We will have to keep a close watch for snags all night," asserted the young miner. "Two guards must be on duty at a time, and they must attend strictly to business. If we are taken by surprise by reds or whites, it will go hard with us. I depend a great deal on Old Dismal. He may be looking after us even now; and if there is any danger, he may be on hand to warn us. Dan is as good as a dozen men in a fight."

None of the party rested very well, for there was too much depending on their readiness to resist an attack, but some of them managed to catch some sleep before the moon rose.

The moon had just crept up high enough to flood the little ravine with light, when one of the guards came into camp with old Dismal Dan.

"Wake up! roll out!" cried the Range Tramp. "Thar's blood on ther moon! Sufferin' Sampson! but ther fur is ap' ter fly afore shortly. Roll out, I say!"

As may be imagined, this call aroused the party instantly. The men sat up, weapons in hand.

"W'at's ther row?" drawled Bigfist, sleepily.

"Ther devil's ter pay!" answered Dismal. "Stir yer stumps all o' ye ef you want ter con-tinner ter rustle aroun' on this hyer globe. Ther Gold Hawks are cumin' red-hot an' still a-heatin'. Thar's goin' ter be er turrible row ef they fine us hyer. Weepin' Isreal! I sh'u'd say so!"

This was sufficient to bring every man to his feet. They pressed around Dan and began to question him.

"Thar hain't no time fer talky-talk," the old man asserted. "Git ready ter move!"

They saw that he meant what he said and did not delay about obeying. In a remarkably short time they were prepared to start.

"Now," said the old borderman, "foller me an' be ready ter fight fer yer lives if ye bav' ter. We may run kerslap inter ther Hawks an' be forced ter fight, though I hope ter git erway soon ernuff ter avoid 'em."

Martin Holmes and Hattie rode side by side, while Rolf followed on foot close at Old Dan's heels. Swiftly and silently the party stole along the ravine.

For thirty minutes they moved onward without a word. Finally Martin Holmes ventured to say, cautiously:

"Isn't the danger past, Dan?"

"Sh!" came from the old Range Tramp's lips as he stopped in his tracks and listened. The others followed his example.

To their ears came the sound of advancing horses.

"Great flutterin' flapjacks!" gasped the old Hills ranger. "They're cumin' shore pop! Thar are sum bushes; git inter them! If we're diskivered, we'll hev ter strike fer our lives an' strike hard! Every man hev his shootin'-iron red-dy."

With very little noise they passed beyond the thin screen of bushes. The rocky wall of the ravine made a dark shadow there and they hoped that their foes would not discover them. The right hand of each man clutched either a revolver or rifle. If discovered, they would make a desperate fight.

On came the unknown horsemen. In a few moments they were in sight. The moonlight revealed more than half a score of masked men, each of whom carried a rifle in his hands.

They were truly the dreaded Gold Hawks!

Without a word the outlaws came on till they were opposite the party behind the screen of bushes. Our friends held their breath, and it seemed that the lawless band was going to pass without discovering them.

But, that was not to be. Suddenly a horse in the bushes gave a snort.

The hidden party was betrayed!

"Halt!" cried the masked man who rode at the head of the outlaws.

The Gold Hawks stopped.

"Reddy!" hissed Old Dismal. "Strike fer your lives! Shoot ter do damage! Now—fire!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE HERMIT TAKES A HAND.

THE rattle of fire-arms echoed along the ravine. Before the surprised outlaws realized that the very ones for whom they were searching were close at hand, a leaden hail that emptied four saddles was poured into the band. One of the Gold Hawks's horses went down, and, freed from restraint, three more dashed wildly away.

A yell of satisfaction pealed from Dismal Dan's lips.

"Whoopin' wild-cats!" shouted the old man. "Thet's ther stuff, an' thar's lots more whar thet cum frum!"

Filled with consternation and amazement, the robbers retreated precipitately. Old Hasty was for charging and making the rout complete, but Dismal restrained him.

"Let 'em go," advised the Range Tramp.

"We've dun ernuff fer ther time. Ef we charge, they'll begin ter throw lead, an' ten ter one some o' us gits hurted."

A short distance away the infuriated Hawks halted and held a consultation. It was plain that they were terribly excited, for a perfect babel of voices came to the ears of our friends.

"I'll be skinned ef they don't act like they had struck er reg'ler s'prise-party," observed Dan.

"I reckon they did run erg'in' su'thin' w'at they wasn't lookin' fer," grinned 'Bijah.

"We'd orter follered 'em," fumed Hasty.

"Don't you worry. They hain't goin' ter butt ther heads erg'in' er bowlder w'en they know ther bowlder's thar. They hev bin inter-juced ter er leetle piece o' sufferin' an' destruk-tion thet'll be pritty ap' ter keep 'em quiet fer er leetle time."

That was Dan's opinion.

Suddenly, above the surviving outlaws, appeared the form of a man. He was plainly visible in the moonlight.

It was the lone man of Wind Canyon!

Martin Holmes uttered a cry.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed; "there he is again! Did I not know that my father was dead and buried years ago, I would swear that man was he!"

For a moment the hermit gazed down into the ravine, then a harsh laugh broke from his lips.

"Ha! ha! ha! Vultures of the Hills! What do ye here?"

The robbers appeared startled and alarmed.

"Beard o' Moses!" burst from the big Californian's lips. "W'at's ther ole galoot goin' ter do?"

"Close your mouth an' p'raps we'll fine out," snapped the '49er, sharply.

"Fly, miscreants, fly!" cried Crazy Mose, "before you are smitten by a just and terrible vengeance! The wrath of God is at hand! Fly! fly!"

"Get out, you crazy old fool!" shouted one of the Hawks, "or we will fill you full of lead!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the man above. "Do you dare still defy my vengeance?"

For reply one of the outlaws suddenly threw up his hand, and a bright flash was followed by the spiteful report of a revolver.

Without a cry, the hermit fell to the ground.

"Heavens! that was murder!" came from Martin Holmes.

"Right!" exclaimed Rolf, swinging his rifle to his shoulder. "And I mean to avenge the old man's death."

But, before the young rifleman could fire Old Hasty checked him.

"Hold easy, yonker! Ther crazy coon hain't ser dead as he might be."

The hermit had suddenly arisen. Once more his wild laugh rung out, causing the outlaws to look up in amazement.

"Tried to murder me, did you?" cried the wild man. "Now take the consequences of your act!"

And, quickly pressing his shoulder against a huge bowlder, with one mighty effort he sent it toppling down upon the masked men below. In a moment the bowlder started a small landslide.

With cries of terror, the Gold Hawks tried to get out of the way of the falling mass. All succeeded but one. He was caught and beaten down.

And, laughing wildly, the hermit seized large stones and hurled them into the midst of the demoralized Hawks, who fled precipitately.

"By Jinks! he's whipped the hull gang!" laughed 'Bijah.

Old Hasty clutched the big Californian by the arm.

"Look there!" he commanded, sharply.

"Who's thet?"

A tall, dark form had sprung out of the shadows and was frantically digging amid the mass of earth and stone that had buried one of the Black Hills Hawks.

"Durned ef it don't look like ther Parson!" asserted 'Bijah.

"Now you're shoutin'" the '49er promptly assented.

At this moment a form suddenly appeared in the very midst of our friends. Where he had come from no one could say, for he seemed to rise out of the ground.

"Pashent Job! who are you?" demanded Dismal.

"I am Jolly Jack Dillon," was the prompt reply; "and I have come to lead you folks to a place of safety."

"Jolly Jack!" cried Rolf. "Pard, I am more than tickled to see you. I declare I thought that there was a chance that you had passed over the Dead Range."

The hands of the two young men met in a hearty shake. Then Jack said:

"Come, we had better be moving at once, for there is no telling when those desperadoes may return. Follow me and I will take you all to a place of safety within a short time."

A minute later the party was moving away from the spot where the encounter had taken place.

Straight to the secret entrance that led to the hermit's hidden cabin the young miner led them. The hermit was there when they reached the spot, and with a few words which seemed like those of a sane man welcomed them.

When the horses were concealed in a place where their discovery would be a matter of chance, the strange man led the way through the passage to the hidden cabin on the cliff. Alsie was there to receive them.

"Welcome to Hidden Home," said the hermit. "The secret of my hiding-place is a secret no longer, for my enemy and that of my child has found this spot. I have decided to go away, and therefore you are allowed to come. I think we are perfectly safe here."

"This, gentlemen, is my adopted daughter. I see that there is a young lady with you, and I hope she and Alsie will become friends. There is no telling how long we may have to remain, and so we all want to be as friendly as we can."

The two girls greeted each other with maidenly warmth, and were well acquainted it seemed in a few moments.

Martin Holmes stared straight at the hermit for several minutes, and then he advanced and laid his hand on the lone man's shoulder. Looking straight into Moses Mason's eyes, he said:

"My friend, your face and voice impress me strangely. I know not why, but it seems that

you and I have known each other in the past. Would you object to telling me your name?"

The hermit seemed moved in a singular manner.

"My name—my name?" he faltered, staring at Holmes as if fascinated. "What is my name? I have forgotten, but I can almost remember now."

He passed his hand slowly across his forehead, still staring at the man whose hand lay on his shoulder.

"I do not know what your name is," replied Holmes, "but you are the perfect image of my father as I remember him. I would swear that you were he had I not seen Loren Holmes placed in a coffin and buried."

"Loren Holmes!"

The hermit fairly shrieked the name, and staggered back a step, staring at the man before him.

"That is my name!" declared the now excited man. "It all comes back to me now. Loren Holmes was my father. I was his older son, and was named for him. My brother's name was Martin; and you—you—can it be—you are he?"

This was a most astonishing revelation, and for a moment Martin Holmes was speechless with amazement. When he regained control of his voice, he cried:

"Is it possible? Why, it was reported that you died in South America, years and years ago!"

"But I did not; I am still alive. Thank Heaven! memory is restored! Perhaps the bullet which grazed my temple to-night is responsible in a measure for this most fortunate occurrence. It did not slay, but it gave me back my reason. Martin, my brother, I am indeed Loren alive, and thank God, well, again—no longer Crazy Mose!"

The two long separated brothers were clasped in each other's arms, laughing and weeping like overjoyed children.

CHAPTER XL.

A NIGHT OF REVELATIONS.

In a short time the hermit had explained why he had not returned home during all the years that elapsed after he left his father's roof determined to make a fortune. He told of the blow that had caused him to forget his own name and made him act like a crazy person at times.

When everything was made clear, Martin introduced his long-lost brother to Rolf and Hattie; when Loren explained how Alsie came to be with him, and told how he and Jack had rescued the girl from the hands of the arch-villain, Noel Kenyon.

When Kenyon's name was mentioned Martin became excited.

"That man is the infamous scoundrel who stole my boy and caused the death of my wife!" he cried. "His true name is Argus Damon, but he has been known by several others."

"He is a prisoner in my power at the present time," asserted Loren. "I will bring him up from the dungeon."

At once the hermit passed down through the trap-door and descended the steps which led to the passage beneath. A few moments later he reappeared and said:

"The prisoner made an attempt to escape by trying to tear away the wall, and a mass of earth and stones has fallen upon him. I think he is badly hurt. Will one or two of you come down and help me get him out?"

Bigfist and Hasty at once descended the steps.

Ten minutes after, the men returned, bearing Argus Damon. The unlucky scoundrel was evidently badly hurt for he was groaning in pain. When he was lifted into the cabin, the little '49er examined his injuries and said:

"He's putty badly stove up. I reckon he's hurt inside, an' it'll be er wonder ef he lives a n'our."

The injured man heard these words and opened his eyes. Almost the first person Damon saw was the man whom he had wronged so greatly, Martin Holmes! Lifting his hand, he motioned for Holmes to approach.

"Martin," he said, huskily, as Holmes bent over him, "I've got to pass in my checks, I reckon; but I've got something to tell you before I give up the ghost. Call those two girls near so that both may hear."

Wonderingly, Martin did as requested.

"Now," said the dying man—for Damon was really dying—"I want you all to listen. What I say may surprise you, but, as there is a God in Heaven, it is the truth! Knowing that my minutes are numbered, I would not lie to you."

"Martin, which of those girls is your daughter?"

Holmes indicated Hattie.

"She is not!" was the amazing assertion which came from the dying man's lips. "As God is my Judge, she is not!"

Martin uttered a cry and reeled back a step. Every one was astounded.

"Not my daughter?" groaned the dismayed man. "What do you mean? Where is my child?"

"Right there!"

The panting wretch lifted himself on one elbow

and pointed straight at Alsie, the hermit's protegee!

For a moment all were dumb with amazement, then the excited parent cried:

"Argus Damon, what do you mean? Explain your words!"

"An easy thing to do. You left your daughter in the care of an old woman while you searched for your lost son. I stole her from the woman and placed the one whom you have thought was your daughter in her place. If the woman ever detected the change, she had not the courage to tell you of it, and so you were deceived."

At first Martin could hardly credit this story, but he was forced after a time to believe that the dying man spoke the truth.

"And so this is my true daughter," he said, as he passed one arm around Alsie and kissed her. "This is a great surprise, but it seems reasonable enough now that it is explained. But, I am not quite ready to let my other child go. Hattie, pet, I cannot give you up!"

And with the other arm he drew the blue-eyed girl fondly to him.

"Nor need you give her up, father," whispered Rolf, his face fairly glowing with a great joy. "She shall still be your daughter as soon as I can make her so!"

Then Martin Holmes understood it all.

"Thank heaven!" he breathed; "it has all turned out for the best! God is indeed good to me, after all!"

And his words were echoed in more than one heart.

The dying man had sunk back with closed eyes. He now opened them and his lips moved, but he made no sound. Big 'Bijah produced a flask of whisky, and a swallow seemed to give Damon strength.

"This is the end of my career," he said, huskily. "I did you a dreadful wrong in the past, Holmes, but I have righted it in a measure. There is some satisfaction in knowing that that relentless detective, Donald Dare, will never have the pleasure of dragging me to prison. Death will defeat him, in a measure."

"Well, you don't feel any worse about that than I do," said a familiar voice, and the head of Daring Don appeared through the opening in the floor!

"Hello, folks," saluted the ex-Parson; "I was near enough to see you enter this hole, and I followed, though I came near not finding the entrance. I have a pard and a prisoner here, below. Guess I will call 'em up."

The head disappeared, but came into view again, a moment later, and the detective sprang up into the room. Close behind him came a masked man, whose hands were tied behind his back. And behind the mask came a person holding a cocked revolver in his hand, who exclaimed, as they reached the cabin floor:

"Go easy dar now, critter! None ob yer funny biz if yo' don't want ter hab yer system venterlated. By golly! I'se only too willin' ter drap yo', I jest is!"

Toby Tadback! the darky alive and well!

The astonishment of those who believed him dead—slain by red-skins—can be imagined.

"Toby!" cried Hattie, and running forward, she seized the little darky's hand and actually kissed him, much to Toby's consternation.

"Golly!" was all he could say.

The friends of the comical little darky crowded around him and shook his hand till it ached. How his white teeth did gleam as he grinned with delight!

"Friends," cried Dare, "if you will give me your attention, I will remove the mask from the face of this outlaw, who was leading the party of Gold Hawks with which we had the encounter to-night. He was caught beneath the landslide, where I found him. I brought him here with the assistance of this negro boy, whom I had previously met amid the Hills. Be prepared for a surprise. Now—look!"

With a swift motion he removed the mask, and a cry of amazement burst from the lips of nearly every one as they saw the face that had been hidden beneath.

Nebraska Nat stood revealed!

At first the friends could scarcely believe the evidence of their eyes. A sickly smile passed over the face of the deceitful scamp, and he said:

"I reckon this little trick is about played out, but you never would have caught onto it if it had not been for this cursed man-hunter. Never mind. He has spoiled my game this time, but I am not dead yet."

"By jimcracks! yo'd orter be!" cried Toby. "Yo' dun yo' lebel bes' ter kill dis chile by shovin' him inter de hole, but I'se a mighty hard coon ter kill."

Loren Holmes strode forward and confronted the traitor guide.

"Ruel Darrow!" thundered the hermit, "do you know me?"

The baffled villain shrunk back, fear plainly written on his face.

"Loren Holmes!" he gasped.

"Yes, Loren Holmes—the man whom you tried to murder, years ago, in California. I still live, you false pard and murderous wretch!"

Then the strange man turned to those around him, and with a few words told them who the unmasked rascal was. The indignation of the listeners was great. It was some time before they could comprehend how greatly they had been deceived.

"Weepin' Isreal!" sighed Old Dismal. "W'at a cussed mess o' blamed idjits we all are!"

Old Hasty and 'Bijah Bigfist gazed into each other's eyes, disgust plainly written on their faces.

"Pard," said the '49er, "I allus tuck you fer ther wu'st fool outside er loone: tic 'sylum, but I must acknowledge thet I am fit ter travel in double harness with you. Le's go out an' kick ourselves off'n the cliff!"

"Old man," uttered the big Californian, "I reckon we'd better go hire ourselves out ter a dime museum as ther wonderful no-brained jackasses frum Fool Holler. I don't believe either of us knows ernuff ter come under kiver w'en it rains."

"This man," said Daring Don, "acts as a decoy for the infamous Gold Hawks. Pretending to be a guide, he lures many a train of emigrants to their destruction. Whether he is the chief of the band or not I cannot say."

"As I have no interest now in doing otherwise, I will tell you the truth," said the unmasked outlaw. "I am not the chief, but am second in command. Sometimes I act as chief, but I have never seen the chief's face, and I do not think that one of the band can truthfully say that he has."

The vile wretch seemed to glory in the fact that he was Captain Hawk's trusted second officer.

"And you it was who released the prisoner last night?"

The outlaw laughed.

"Yes, I did it," he confessed. "It came near being a bad job for me, but I bluffed you all even after the detective had accused me. Cheek will do considerable in such cases. The prisoner was an old pal of mine."

"Yes, Darrow," said the dying man, faintly. "I have been your companion in crime, but my career is at an end. I am going before the Judgment Bar and you will have to follow sooner or later. It is a terrible thing to think of!"

A few minutes later Argus Damon, the man of many names and many crimes, breathed his last.

The mysteries were cleared up, the separated ones reunited, and every one seemed happy but Old Dismal, whose face looked even sadder than usual.

The body of Argus Damon was buried in the passage that led from the hidden cabin.

The entire party, including the outlaw lieutenant who was taken along as a prisoner, guided by the Range Tramp, left the Hidden Cabin and turned their faces toward Custer City, which place they finally reached in safety.

But, while making the journey, "Nebraska Nat" succeeded in escaping. Within a year he was hung near Deadwood for "appropriating" another man's horse.

The Gold Hawks suddenly and mysteriously vanished from that part of the country.

Whether the band disbanded, or moved to another section, is not generally known; but, as a fact the Black Hills Scourges utterly disappeared.

Who was Captain Hawk? That is an unanswerable question. Some declared that the robber chief was a woman, while others claimed that he was the "Nebraska Nat" of this story, despite the fact that the false guide denied that he was the real leader. Certain it is that "Nat" had unlimited power among the band, for under his directions Hattie was captured, and the sham escape from the Den was carried out as planned by him. If the girl had not come to him, he would have gone to her prison chamber, and, having declared that he had broken his bonds, and overpowered the guard, the same farce would have been carried out with slight variations.

Donald Dare did not succeed in securing the reward that was offered for the capture of Argus Damon, or "Slippery Steve," alive; but the daring detective did not feel that his efforts had been entirely wasted, for he had seen the schemes of two wily villains come to naught, and that to a true detective would be good pay.

In the course of time a double wedding took place.

Rolf and Hattie, Jack and Alsie, the happy principals!

Who was present at the wedding? The reunited and happy brothers, Loren and Martin Holmes, of course. The peculiar pards, Old Hasty and 'Bijah Bigfist, witnessed the "operation," as 'Bijah called it. The little darky, Toby, was present to grin his delight. Dismal Dan, the Range Tramp, was on hand to look as sad as if he was attending a funeral till both of the fair young brides kissed him. Then the old fellow turned red through the coat of tan which covered his skin and actually smiled a little, as he spluttered:

"Great flutterin' flapjacks!"

THE END.

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